Impressions of the USSR Series

a soviet journey

BY ALEX LA GUMA

This is a book of impressions from a tour of the Soviet Union. The writer visited Moscow, Leningrad, Central Asia, Siberia and the Baltic republics. He had encountered with people from all walks of life—Communist Party workers, government officials, people active in science and culture, factory managers and construction supervisors, workers and farmers, students and schoolchildren. The book contains extensive factual material on the history, political structure, economy, culture, educational system, and life style of the peoples of the USSR. The growth of the Soviet Central Asian republics is used as a background in an exposition of the nationalities policy of the Soviet Union. Vivid accounts are given of major construction projects, such as the Nurek Hydroelectric Power Station in Tajikistan, and the Samotlor oilfields in Siberia.

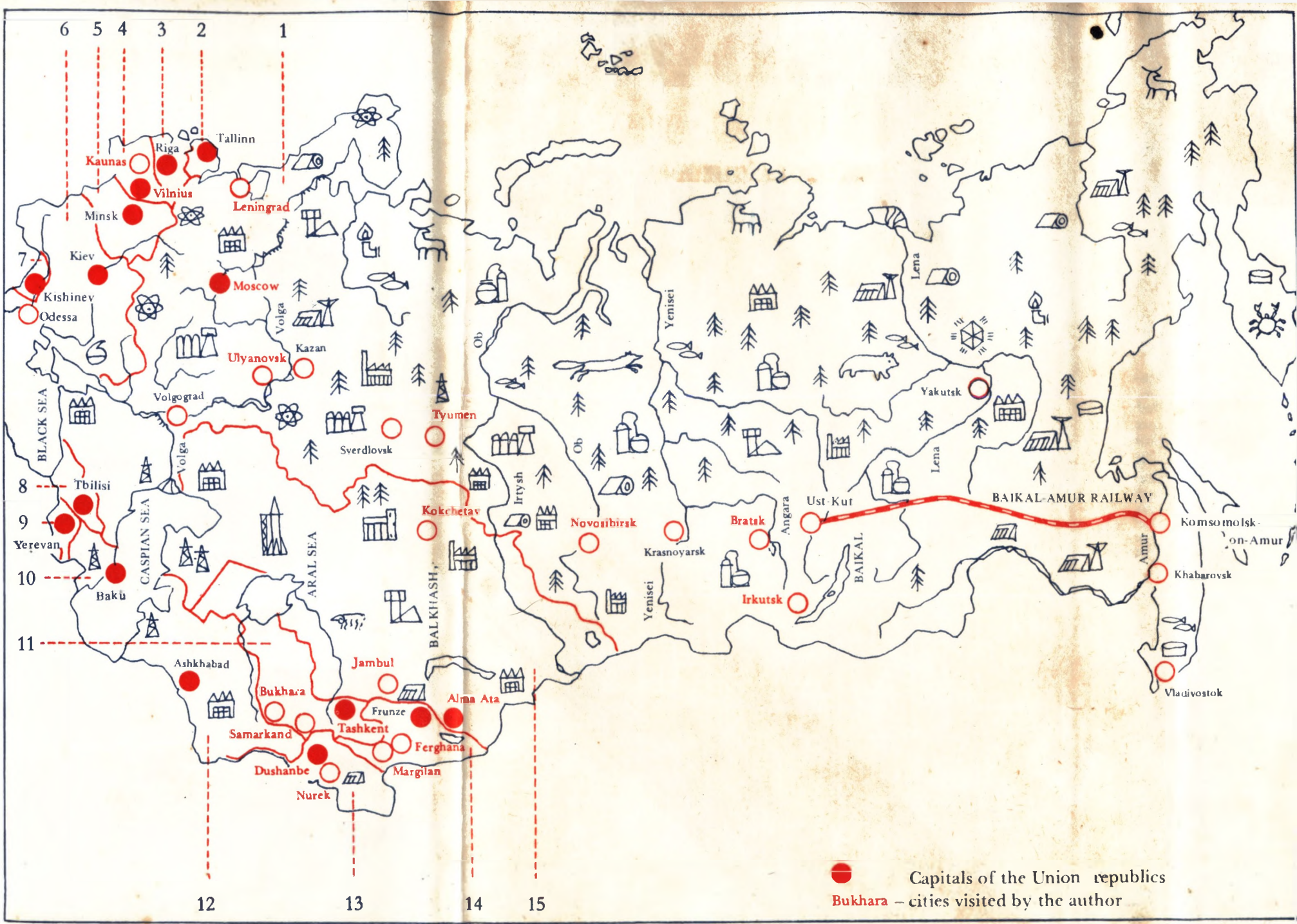
There are interesting sketches of workers, and depictions of the relations between people of different nationalities. The book is profusely illustrated.

The growing demand for information is a keynote of the age. People want to know more, to have deeper insight into events, to receive authentic information. Where and how to obtain knowledge about the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR), which has emerged from a dim past and taken a big step to the threshold of the future in just several dozen years?

The Progress Publishers' Impressions of the USSR Series is a useful source of information. The books in this series are by authors who have visited the Soviet Union and saw the life of its people at first hand. They present an unbiased story of the men and women who in a short period of history transformed the former tsarist Russia into one of the world's most advanced countries in economy, science, culture and other fields. The books in the Impressions of the USSR Series are on a variety of topics related to the rapidly developing society that is building communism.

The industrialisation programme made it possible to set up industrial centres in the formerly backward regions

These were the great plains of Kazakhstan ... endless to the eyes, as if they stretched to the edge of the world under an equally endless sky



Figures stand for Union republics:

1	Russian	4	Lithuanian	7	Moldavian	10	Azerbaijan	13	Tajik
2	Estonian	5	Byelorussian	8	Georgian	11	Uzbek	14	Kirghiz
3	Latvian	6	Ukrainian	9	Armenian	12	Turkmen	15	Kazakh

... Giant cedars and pines overhanging the water add to the distinctive wild beauty of the lake....

I HAD NOT GONE IN SEARCH OF THAT MYSTERIOUS 'RUSSIA'S SOUL', BUT TO SEE SOCIALISM AT WORK

ALEX LA GUMA

Progress
Publishers
Moscow

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of the
USSR
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The author wishes to extend his thanks to Progress Publishers, Moscow, and the USSR Writers Union for making this work possible. His sincere appreciation also goes to all personnel who assisted him and saw to it that he reached his various destinations in the Soviet Union in good order.

Alex La Guma

АЛЕКС ЛА ГУМА

ПУТЕШЕСТВИЕ В СОВЕТСКИЙ СОЮЗ

На английском языке

REQUEST TO READERS

Progress Publishers would be glad to have your opinion of this book, its design and any suggestions you may have for future publications.

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'Truly when a person is on a journey he learns many things, and he increases his knowledge.'

Salim bin Abakari: *A Journey to Russia and Siberia in 1896*

Prologue

Over the eightpenny seats the smell of fried fish and tobacco mingled with cheap perfume and breath, and the beam from the projector-room was hazy with cigarette smoke. On the screen Russia flickered: the poor, discarded heroine ran tearfully beside the train through the falling studio snowflakes, frantically searching each lighted carriage window. There was the Prince, haughty and disdainful, ignoring her pleas, tears, staring ahead stonily. Later in the film, contrite, he followed her into the Siberian snows and exile. The women in the eightpennies wiped their eyes and Hollywood's *Resurrection* came to an end. On another occasion, Nelson Eddy in a satin blouse and high boots sang *Dark Eyes* and *The Volga Boatmen*, the Revolution came and all the nobility fled to Paris to open restaurants where there was more singing to the accompaniment of nostalgic balalaikas.

These were our childhood impressions of one-sixth of the world's surface. One's education improved in patches: with the stories of Gorky; my father's reminiscences of two brief trips to Moscow in the 1920s; the Friends of the Soviet Union in South Africa showed *The Battleship Potemkin* and *The Stone Flower*; after the Second World War there was the documentary *Battle of Stalingrad*.

For the rest, the USSR was a big patch on the map of the world, the unpronounceable names of cities, odd articles in newspapers, and the *Collected Works* of V. I. Lenin. Discussion groups debated the national question and the USSR was cited regularly as an example of how problems of national conflict had been resolved. Phrases leaped like electric sparks through the stale air of meeting rooms: 'Workers' power', 'the right to self-determination', 'the Land of Soviets', 'national culture'.

A. A. Gromyko spoke at the United Nations; the Soviet Union supported the anti-colonialist struggles, condemned apartheid, aided the national liberation movements.

In spite of the cold-war, anti-Soviet campaigns, the USSR lodged in the minds of the poor, the struggling. Sometimes sophisticatedly, sometimes simply. They were on our side. In a prison cell in Cape Town an unknown prisoner had scratched crudely on the wall: 'Russia will never die.'

In November 1917 (October by the old Russian calendar), the armed workers, soldiers and sailors had stormed the Winter Palace in Petrograd as the guns of the *Aurora* cruiser on the Neva River fired the first salvo. Today some commentators in the West–can one call them historians–grumble disconsolately that the storming of the Winter Palace is all a myth. But A. V. Lunacharsky had been there, and John Reed, among others. The clay foundations of an old empire crumpled to dust and the waves created by its collapse spread far and wide, touching and changing the lives of millions all over the world. For the first time in history the oppressed classes of a country seized power to build a new kind of state.

The shock waves of this Revolution did not fail to stir those who inhabited the colonial countries. The first demonstrations of support for the actions of the revolutionaries were made by Senegalese troops of the French Army stationed in Romania. Units among them refused to take part in suppressing Soviet power in Russia.

The October Revolution hastened the formation of Marxist-Leninist parties and groups everywhere. In particular, the defeat of nazism and the Japanese military machine by the effort in the main of the Soviet Army and the Soviet people added impetus to the development of struggle in the colonies. Surely the effect of the war was that the poor were finally convinced that they could conquer their seemingly invulnerable masters. Lenin had said that the replacement of capitalism by socialism was an historic epoch which would consist of a whole series of democratic and revolutionary movements, including the national liberation movement among the underdeveloped, backward and oppressed nations. The socialist revolution, he pointed out, would not be solely, or chiefly, a struggle of the revolutionary proletarians in each country against their bourgeoisie; it would be a struggle of all

dependent countries against international imperialism.*

One way or the other, the movements of the colonial peoples could not ignore the socialist alternative. The socialist orientation of Algeria was approved in 1963 and a number of other developing countries came out in favour of socialism. The Convention of the People's Party of Ghana declared in 1962 that taking into account the legacy left behind by imperialism, socialism is the system which will enable Ghana to develop. Sékou Touré said in the same year that the experience of his country was a new attempt at socialist development of a peasant land. And Keita of Mali said that the final and irreversible choice in favour of socialism has been made. In Asia and Latin America the same ideas were being expressed.

The programme of the Popular Unity Government of Chile led by the slain Salvadore Allende stated that it would be a multi-party one and that the opposition would have full freedom to act within legal limits. On the economic front, it said that the main objective of the policy of the united popular forces was to replace the present economic structure–to begin the building of socialism.

The acceptance of socialism in principle is no substitute for a profound study of the realities of the world, for the concrete implementation of theory in everyday life. Various obstacles, including counter-revolutionary coups, might have interrupted the process, but it is clear that the very fact that socialist ideas, no matter how variant, have been accepted is proof of the ideological and political defeat suffered by the old order.

In May 1974, a column of people led by Fidel Castro and Pepe Ramirez, leader of the Cuban Small Farmers Association, climbed the muddy slopes of the Sierra Maestra to a small clearing known as La Plata to commemorate the 15th anniversary of a law, which had radically changed the lives and perspectives of the Cuban peasantry with its agrarian reform.

'When the imperialists organised their counter-revolutionary bands and committed all sorts of crimes against

* See V. I. Lenin, *Collected Works*, Vol. 30, p. 159.

our peasants, our workers, our revolutionary officials and our teachers and even against those who were teaching others how to read and write,' Castro told the meeting, 'our workers and peasants closed ranks in the struggle against those counter-revolutionary bands and wiped them off our soil forever.

It should be pointed out that to this alliance, to this union of the two classes, the peasants and the workers, the workers contributed something essential, decisive, indispensable and irreplaceable today.... The working class contributed to this struggle with its own ideology: Marxism-Leninism, the struggle for socialism, for communism.

'An alliance between workers and landowners and an alliance between workers and bankers and great capitalists were out of the question. An alliance between exploiters and exploited was out of the question. It was necessary to establish an alliance of the exploited–and the two exploited classes were precisely the working class and the peasantry. The working class and the peasantry became united to make the revolution, to establish a new way of life and a new society, to put an end to the exploitation of man by man, to build socialism, to build communism. That is what Lenin had in mind when he spoke of the need for the worker-peasant alliance in the old tsarist regime.'

It was no sermon on the Mount, for what Fidel Castro was saying was that it had been done before, had been done again and could still be done. Decades ago the common interests of the working people, and working people of different nationalities, had taken the road to socialism, spurred on by a desire for joint effort and fraternal co-operation, to form in December 1922 a single multinational state, the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics.

We all wanted to see this much proclaimed wonder of the world. But one wanted to see it beyond the theoretical works of Lenin–the ranked volumes on numerous bookshelves; the posters of solid-jawed workers against a background of factories; the pictures of Soviet leaders at state receptions, at the United Nations; the exhibitions. This, one felt, could no longer be the country of medieval icons; the accounts of Marco Polo: 'Russia is a very large

province lying towards the north. The people are Christians and observe the Greek rite. They have several kings and speak a language of their own. They are very simple folk and they are very good-looking, both men and women, for they are fair-skinned and blonde.... It is not a country of much commercial wealth. It is true, however, that it produces precious furs–sable, ermine, vair, and foxes in abundance, the best and most beautiful in the world.... Russia is such a huge province that it extends as far as the Ocean. In this Ocean are islands that breed many gerfalcons and peregrines, which are exported to several parts of the world.'

Or, perhaps, this still *was* part of the picture? Many of the old things, much of the past, possibly still hung on?

* * *

'I often go to the Soviet Union for my holidays,' the little Englishman, next to me, said. There was a crumb of airline cake on his chin. At his feet an airbag was decorated with a tag bearing the name of a travellers club and I pictured him diligently paying the instalments on the excursion costs throughout the preceding year. He had the air of the cosmopolitan despite his clerk-on-vacation look, and he spoke in Russian to the stewardess with ease which made me feel the novice I was.

The first invitation to visit the USSR had come in Scandinavia. In the course of attending a conference of Scandinavian and African writers a secretary from the Soviet Embassy had turned up with an offer from the Writers Union. It was at a party given by the students and the invitation came politely through the electronic blare of pop music. But I had to return to London in a hurry. I had just arrived in Europe and there was the business of finding a flat, settling in, putting our children in school; crates of kitchenware and clothes had to be unpacked. One wondered whether the old-time exiles had bothered about such mundane things. The secretary from the embassy looked glum when I told him I was unable to accept this time. I bought him a whisky and we sat for a while watching the dancers. But the following month the Writers

Union invited me as a guest to their congress, and there I was on the plane, sitting beside the experienced Englishman.

'Moscow is lovely,' he advised me, 'but I like Leningrad better. More charm.' He took another bite at his cake.

The distorted voice, which comes over all airline systems, made the usual announcement about seat belts. We obeyed the instructions, while craning our necks to see below as the plane started to lose height. My first glimpse of the USSR in early spring revealed an oval of black birch forests and patches of snow. The leaves had not yet begun to bloom and the countryside around Moscow looked bleak. One thought of winter, the nazi dead refrigerated in the bleached whiteness, of Napoleon's gaunt troops retreating past the abandoned capsized cannon as they plodded in the heatless padding of despair into the levelled pitchforks of stolid peasants. Tolstoy's *War and Peace* came into my mind as Russia rose towards the wheels of the aircraft.

A soldier of the frontier forces–khaki and green, black top boots–watched the passengers deplane. I lost sight of the little Englishman and never saw him again, and so advanced into the concrete, glass and steel of the arrival hall. Other planes had landed and passengers jostled and milled under the signs in that strange alphabet, while a front line of rosy young women in padded clothes and headscarves cried, 'Smallpox! Smallpox!' for our vaccination certificates.

* * *

As books will tell you, the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics is the largest country on the globe and covers an area of 22.4 million square kilometres. Cramped diagonals and tiny squares on a relief map will etch out such regions as the East European plain, the West Siberian lowland, the Transcaspian lowland. All these and other features form a sort of gigantic amphitheatre tilted upward in the south-east, dipping downward north and west. It is a voluntary, federative association of fifteen sovereign re-

publics. The yearbooks and encyclopaedias are full of such facts and the Soviet Union is fond of statistics: you find them everywhere. There is a certain permanent anxiety to inform. Not everybody gets a chance to visit there and it is necessary to get beyond the little Englishman and the crowds of lapel-tagged tourists and delegates milling among the suitcases in the hotel lobbies: Chickasaw Travel, People to People, the Smithsonian Society.

Once in 1968, returning from one of those odd visits, the customs officers at London Airport pricked up their ears when I replied that I had been to the Soviet Union. My bag was ransacked, the seams examined. I was taken to a little room where I was searched from head to toe, my conference papers were taken away for a while probably to be photographed, while a special branch man who called me 'sir' chatted politely about communism in spite of my stare, but the police states are beyond the 'Iron Curtain' or what Mr. Harold Wilson later called 'the great divide', where the passport officer merely rubber-stamped me through the barrier with a smile, and the customs men did not bother.

'Communism is all right,' the special branch man said. 'The trouble is that it is administered by human beings.'

I wondered curiously whether he meant that the administrators of capitalist states were not human, therefore free of 'the trouble'. I left him with his natty blazer, the plump pink cheeks and smooth hair, and the smile of triumph having delivered his little talk on 'communism'.

Who were these 'human beings'? The Soviet Union is a multinational state; it is populated by more than one hundred large and small nationalities. Together with such large nations as the Russians and the Ukrainians there are very small national minorities of about a thousand (the Orochi and the Nganasans) or a mere five hundred (the Yukagirs). All of these have caused the USSR to become of irreversible international importance, a major landmark in social development. Soviet experience in creating a multinational socialist state, in grappling by common effort with a complex national question, has won world recognition, and the attention of all those who still seek the answer to such questions.

The existence of the Soviet Union guarantees the encyclopaedic experience of millions who survived the Civil War, the Hitler's invasion, and what L. I. Brezhnev described thirty years after the victory over nazism as 'torrents of slander and provocations. . . , atomic blackmail, attempts at economic blockade. . .'*.

Many had to be satisfied with such information. Now, luckily, I was far from the eightpenny seats in the smoky cinema in Cape Town. The pictures did not waver and flicker and the snow was not artificial.

* L. I. Brezhnev, *Following Lenin's Course,* Moscow, 1975, p. 556.

I. Flashbacks

From somewhere in the distance came the faint sounds of bands playing. It came through dreamless sleep and when I woke up the spring sky beyond the window was blue and cloudless. The bands went on playing, but when I went to the window of the hotel room there was nothing to see but a man in a white coat in the courtyard below, a girl in a track suit doing exercises in a patch of sunlight by a wall, and past the rooftops opposite, the red star on the tower of the Kremlin.

The night before I had landed at Sheremetyevo Airport in Moscow. Something had gone wrong and my friend had not turned up to meet me. An airport official who spoke English asked me to sit down while somebody used the telephone. Beyond the plate glass the night looked chilly, but few people were wearing heavy clothes. The airport man came back and said somebody was on the way to meet me. He wore a blue Aeroflot uniform and had a dark Uzbek face and smiled all the time.

'First time in our country?' he asked.

'No. I have been here before on short visits,' I told him. Beyond us the tannoy announced the flights in the usual distorted tones and people with suitcases went in and out of the swing-doors. In the square outside people queued for taxis in the dark.

'It takes a long time to see the whole of the Soviet Union,' the airport man said. 'You should come one day on a long trip.' He sounded eager that everybody should see his country and gestured at a huge stylised map of the USSR showing the network of air routes. 'We are always ready to help.'

The friend who came to meet me that time spoke only German and I summoned a few guide-book phrases from a rear pigeon-hole of my memory and stumbled into fairly intelligible communication. The airline man was going

off duty and asked whether we could give him a lift as far as the city terminal.

From the airport to the city the road was long and dark and empty until the first suburbs swept into sight. Old-style wooden houses and then the blocks of flats, windows showing yellow light here and there; a blue neon sign over a provision store saying *Gastronom.* The smiling Uzbek chatted all the way as we exchanged cigarettes. On the roadside we passed the war memorial, constructed in the form of huge red tank barriers. This was the furthest point of the nazi advance on Moscow.

'We did not invite them, so we had to kill them,' the Uzbek said. 'If they had come as guests like you we would have taken them to Moscow in a taxi.' His brown face wrinkled with chuckles.

Moscow came into sight, lit up against the dark sky a bridge across the Moskva River, a growing montage of neon decorations and signs in the unfamiliar alphabet that made a particoloured haze among the blocks and spires.

* * *

The bands were for the Young Pioneers. It was their day and they were on parade that morning.* In Manezhnaya Square the remnants of the parade made a scattering like confetti of red scarves and caps, white shirts, that trickled away down the side streets. It seemed as if Moscow had become a city of children. They were everywhere, in files or in groups, outnumbering the adult citizens, crowding around the street stalls that sold ice-cream, pastries, *pirozhki* (patties) stuffed with egg, rice or meat. Stout women in white overalls manned these kiosks surrounded by thickets of impatient hands.

In March, there had been sombre-coloured coats, sheepskins, quilted jackets and shawls, boots, in the last brisk cold of departing winter. Now in May, along Ulitsa (Street) Gorky, Leninsky Prospekt, Prospekt Marxa and on Red Square winter had been shed and the Muscovite

* Every year on May 19, a rally is held on Red Square to mark the founding of the Young Pioneer Organisation, a mass organisation for schoolchildren in the nine to fourteen age group.–*Ed.*

women in gay dresses bloomed like flowers with blonde, brown, black tousled heads and bare arms. The winter boots were gone and the men wore open sandals.

You walked in the stream of people through the subway and came out again into the sunlight, passed the History Museum and there you were in the square with the long crenelated red walls of the Kremlin and the fir trees and the dome overhead where the red flag flapped quietly in the small breeze. Here over the cobble-stones with the faded traffic lines, the thousands of feet and the heavy wheels of displayed armour and weaponry crunched as the mass parades of workers, soldiers and sailors pass November after November, May Day after May Day,* the ranks passing the geometrical red marble tomb where Lenin lies.

St. Basil's Cathedral looks just as it appears on innumerable postcards, with the candy-striped colours and gilt onion-domes. Within the walls of the Assumption Cathedral the icons look back at sightseers with the sad eyes of disappointed saints. The steel and glass Palace of Congresses looks somewhat out of place among the old structures from Russian history, too modern, too angular, too shiny, like a computer lost in Atlantis. But at night you ride up its seemingly miles of escalators with the chatter of Russian, American and English tongues into the fairyland drama of Tchaikovsky's *Swan Lake* presented by the Bolshoi ballet company, and you can pardon its proximity to the ancient spires and the Tsar Bell with its broken-off chip that weighed eleven tons.

At Lenin's Mausoleum the inevitable queue had formed, waiting to be admitted past the rigid sentries. It was a sort of pilgrimage: not only religious people are spiritually moved, for the working class has its own heroes. In the thronged square cameras clicked as holiday-makers posed, and an excursion agent with a loudhailer advertised his sight-seeing tour. Across the square, behind a line of trees, the bulk of the GUM department store spills out its customers onto the old cobble-stones.

* Since 1969, military parades are held only on November 7, the anniversary of the October Socialist Revolution.–*Ed.*

The square is eight hundred years old. Here on Red Square in 1380, the cheering Muscovites had crammed to welcome the dusty warriors who had just routed Mamai's Tatar hordes at Kulikovo Field on the Don. Led by Prince Dmitry, now called Donskoi, the armoured victors rode into the Kremlin through Frolovsky Gate, where the Spassky Gate now stands.

One day in 1671, the square growled like a disturbed beast. Thousands had pushed in to watch the bearded prisoner brought in irons to be quartered on the scaffold at the place of execution in front of the Spassky Tower. This was Stenka Razin who had led the peasant uprising that had swept over the country against the Russian nobility. He had apologised to the crowd for not being able to carry on his fight to the victorious end. Now people still sang the ballad of Stenka Razin and recounted legends of this peasant leader, and a street off Red Square where he died is named after him.

There is another street nearby called Yevgeny Sapunov. He had commanded a company of Red Guards during the revolutionary days of 1917. Late in the evening of October 27 his company had marched across the square to take up guard duty at the Moscow Soviet, the headquarters of the uprising. Near the History Museum they were attacked by Cadets. The ensuing battle left the cobble-stones dribbling with blood and strewn with the dead and wounded as the revolutionaries fought their way to the Moscow Soviet.

The first bloody battle of the Moscow insurrection sparked off seven days of fierce street fighting, which ended in victory for the power of workers and peasants.

Here on this square the people celebrated days of triumph and sorrow. In 1941, when the nazi troops were at the gates of Moscow the armymen had marched from the traditional November 7 parade straight to the front. Three and a half years later, at the Victory Parade, two hundred banners of the routed *Wehrmacht*–including Hitler's personal standard–were hurled to the cobble-stones at the foot of Lenin's Mausoleum.

In 1967, I stood with the crowd in the section designated for guests and delegations beside the Mausoleum and

the speakers' rostrum. It was cold that November 7 and it was the 50th anniversary of the Revolution. An old woman in bulky clothes sold hot spiced wine and we drank from the paper cartons, waiting for the parade to begin. The perimeter was surrounded by thousands of people holding banners and the square itself was packed with ranks of troops. Eventually there was a stir and a murmur in the crowd and craning of necks and the overcoated and hatted figures of the leaders of the Soviet Union filing up onto the rostrum appeared. A voice bawled and the ranked boots crashed to attention. A car with the general receiving the parade drove out of the Spassky Gate of the Kremlin. He heard the report of the officer commanding the military parade, drove past the lined up units, congratulating them on the holiday. Thereupon, leaving the car he ascended the rostrum and made a speech. After the speech the bands played again and the troops passed in parade, the mobile weaponry trundling over the cobbles, and the vast intercontinental missiles looking like monstrous cigars with their crimson nose-cones, and then the ranks of athletes and children scattering the guests with bouquets; the floats and columns, and columns of workers under banners and placards and red flags that sprouted overhead like scarlet flowers.

The parade went on for hours and I learned afterwards that the authorities had decided to shorten it in the future in view of the cold and uncertain weather during November.

A vendor in the Metro was selling books, new translations of an Italian novel, poetry from Japan. From below the crowds streamed up the escalators from the platforms, hung with chandeliers and decorated with bronze statuary, disgorging into the streets.

At a bookshop I bought a volume of poetry by the Kazakh Abai Kunanbayev in English. On the shelves the Russian translations of Jack London, Hemingway, Dickens, Shakespeare, Mark Twain ranked shoulder to shoulder with Tolstoy, Gorky, Pushkin, Gogol.

The taxi-driver needed a shave and drove with careless nonchalance past the boards advertising films and plays: Lev Tolstoy's *The Power of Darkness*, John Osborne's

Look Back in Anger. I held onto my seat as we tore past the notices proclaiming industrial targets for that year and the decorative red flags and photographs of labour heroes and leaders of the Party. It seemed an elaborate sport, speeding, swerving, stalling, a game of touch-and-go. The traffic played 'dodge'em', buses, trucks, cars, checker-striped green taxis, Pobedas, Volgas, Zils and the pedestrians seemed equally adroit.

The taxi-driver chuckled. He had driven many foreign visitors. Were the slums in Glasgow as bad as he had heard? What does this comrade do?

'He is a writer,' my guide Victor told him.

'Ah. Well, I hope he writes the truth,' the driver said, calmly squeezing between a trolleybus and a heavy truck. 'Some of our writers either oversimplify things or they do not tell the real truth about our life and our society. Then we have to pull them up for it.'

At the Dostoyevsky monument he climbed out with us and joined in the discussion, accepting one of my English cigarettes. Dostoyevsky's *Winter Notes on Summer Impressions* after his travels in Western Europe: 'And soon after this they proclaimed *liberté, égalité, fraternité*. Well and good! But what is *liberté*? It means freedom. What kind of freedom? Equal freedom for all to do whatever they wish within the framework of the law? When may one do whatever one wishes? When one possesses a million. Does freedom provide each man with a million? No. What is a man without a million? A man without a million is not one who does whatever he pleases, but one who is treated any way it pleases others. There is no evidence of fraternity, because what has emerged is the personal principle, that of separateness, enhanced by self-preservation and self-activity within one's own *I*.'*

I answered the knock on the door and there was an aged and tired-looking man with a lined face, unkempt hair. His baggy suit was shiny with wear and he held a battered and bulging briefcase as if it contained delicate glass. He was a little tipsy and pumped my hand while

* F. M. Dostoyevsky, *Collected Works* in thirty volumes, Vol. 5, Leningrad, 1973, pp. 78-79.–*Ed.*

he babbled in Russian. With the help of an English-speaking young man down the corridor I learned that my visitor was Maximov.

'In 1927, I interviewed and photographed James La Guma,' he told me surprisingly, patting my shoulder. 'Now I have come to see what the son looks like.'

We sat down and he excavated a bottle of wine from the ageing briefcase. Would I join him? Indeed, I was interested to meet somebody who remembered my father in Moscow those years ago. We talked of those times, while he waved his glass, nodding and smiling merrily. He would bring me a photocopy of the newspaper–now no longer published–in which my father's photograph appeared. He had taken the picture himself.

True to his word, he turned up again with the photostated page carrying my father's picture. We sat in the hotel restaurant under a frescoed ceiling that strangely showed overalled workers surrounded by Grecian-like nymphs, while the uniformed waitresses hurried about to the clicking of cutlery. He was more or less retired now, Maximov explained over the chicken cutlets and cognac; he did free-lance journalism. He had a cottage in the suburbs and a garden where he grew tomatoes. He produced very good tomatoes, he said with pride.

We said *do svidanya* (good-bye). He shook my hand and patted my arm and then walked away among the tables, clutching his old briefcase and his memories with a certain air of battered pride.

At a theatre down a side street I went to see *Man of La Mancha* one evening. It was beautifully done and without the gaudiness one associated with plays with Spanish medieval background, and quite moving, which was how I thought the writer meant it to be, and I thought about it all the next day.

In the gardens around the Kremlin elderly people rested with their stringbags and read *Pravda, Izvestia* and *Trud* under the lilacs, while the young couples sauntered by. It was like a sort of *paseo*, a promenade, the couple linked by their fingers and the girl sniffing at her tiny bouquet, while the boy smiled with that age-old secrecy.

Beyond the lilacs was the tomb of the Unknown Soldier and the eternal flame and here again the ordinary folk had laid simple bunches of flowers and the newly-weds came to put down their bridal bouquets. It is the custom of bridal couples all over the Soviet Union.

'Do Svidanya', Moscow

The early morning blurred the trees and the river was dark except for the reflection of the neon sign on the power station flashing the old slogan, 'Communism means Soviet power plus the electrification of the entire country'. The dawn sky was broken by the skyline of the city with the wedding-cake architecture of the Ukraine Hotel and other tall buildings here and there. The ruby stars on the spires of the Kremlin winked. Downstairs the foyer was deserted except for a militiaman, who dozed in a chair by the big doors. Outside an old woman swept night off the side-walk, swish-swish, with her reed broom. The taxicab sped through the awakening streets and I discovered that the driver's little son collected foreign coins, so I donated an old twelve-sided English threepenny piece to the collection. The first people were on their way to work from the yellow or beige blocks of flats, spilling from the early trolleybuses.

In the five years of 1971-1975, the city built nearly 530,000 homes. All in all, nearly 2,500,000 people either moved into new houses or had their living conditions improved. They built another 132 schools, kindergartens and nurseries for 55,600 children, over 1,000 new shops and restaurants and eleven cinemas.

The façades of Herzen, Gorky and Kropotkin streets and thousands of other places of historic interest were being given a face lift. Some 21,000 dilapidated or otherwise unworthy buildings were being demolished. There is a great deal of greenery in Moscow and much more in the new districts. Another 450 acres were being planted inside the city's green belt. The Soviet Union loves monuments and the Academy of Arts had set up a special council to advise on statuary in public places, and some thirty

monuments were to be raised in public places in the city in the next few years.

There is a new Sports Palace in Sokolniki, an Olympic rowing canal has been built in the city outskirts at Krylatskoye, and they are thinking about a children's Sports Palace.

In the capitalist countries the private ownership of land gives local authorities little chance of handling it as they would like. That is not the case in the USSR and the Moscow City Soviet can make decisions in the interest of the Muscovites.

Phantoms

Perhaps, the little Englishman on the plane had been right. Leningrad had a personality of its own, perhaps because there is a mixture of old French and Italian, because it had been the old capital, because the Revolution had been born here. You could take your choice: it catered to a variety of sentiments.

Leningrad is the halfway station between Asia and the Arctic, somebody once said. The plane came down over the suburbs, over single-storey houses and then big wooden houses and the concrete estates crowding the old city wriggling around the Neva.

Leningrad belongs to the Decembrists, that group of officers and nobles who revolted against the tsar in December 1825. When the guards paraded in St. Petersburg they had not sworn for Nicholas. Dispersed by artillery they suffered heavy losses; other outbreaks in the south were similarly defeated. Of 579 men brought to trial nearly half were acquitted, but five were hanged and 116 exiled to Siberia.

Leningrad can boast the Kirov ballet and the Elektrosila Works. You can also stroll along and see where the heroine of *The Queen of Spades* threw herself from the bridge into the Neva River. Leningrad was Pushkin's and Dostoyevsky's stamping ground. Here are the streets which are the backgrounds to *Crime and Punishment* or *The Gambler.*

When the pale White Nights glint on the Peter and Paul Fortress, it is the ghost of St. Petersburg returned, the phantom city where Pushkin is dying after that duel and saying, 'Good-bye, my friends', to his rows of books.

The golden needle of the Admiralty spire pierces the sky and Dostoyevsky is heading across Sennaya Square, from the Engineers School, or down the Sadovaya towards the Nevsky. Into the Karetnaya the streets become darker and narrower. Perhaps, he is on his way to meet with the revolutionary socialist Petrashevsky or with Speshnev. He is part of the revolutionary organisation for the struggle against autocracy.

One early morning in April 1849 the gendarmerie arrives at his door, their sabres clanking. They have instructions for his arrest. He dresses, while the police rummage through his papers. 'True Christianity demands a social commonwealth in which all share their goods.' Outside a carriage waits and in the grey light of pre-dawn the street looks especially gloomy and there is a thin drizzle. They all get into the carriage and it rattles off down the street, bumping along the cobbles. Perhaps, they drive along the Yekaterininsky Canal, past the Summer Garden and arrive at the headquarters of the Third Section.* They pass several courtyards before the carriage stops. Many who went this way vanished or left again for the snows of Siberia or the Peter and Paul Fortress.

Others are brought; all day they arrive. Hours later the soldiers are given orders and the prisoners are marched out again to waiting carriages. The windows are painted over and they only hear the journey: bridges, cobblestones, streets. Presently the carriages stop and there is a glimpse of stone ramparts around St. Peter's Gate of the Peter and Paul Fortress and Trezzini's statue of Mars. They rumble over a bridge and, perhaps, there is a peal of bells; it comes from the Peter and Paul Cathedral with its spire rising above the massive walls of the fortress.

Days and months pass and then the carriages arrive again. The snow lies heavy and yellow under the lights

* Third Section–the name for the secret political police in tsarist pre-revolutionary Russia.–*Ed.*

and again they drive across the city and cross the Troitsky Bridge over the Neva. At last they stop and the shouted orders crackle in the cold air that makes the prisoners shrink. They are in the great square, Semyonovskaya, the tsar's parade ground. There are the cupolas of the Trinity Cathedral and a packed crowd behind the rows of Cossacks, and officers on horseback and on foot. And off to one side are the firing-stakes.

The bearded, black-clad priest is intoning a prayer, while the prisoners shiver in the cold. Somewhere nearby an official is reading from a paper: '... Condemn the aforesaid Petrashevsky Mikhail Vassilyevich to death by shooting....' The emotionless voice goes on: ...the above-named Dostoyevsky Fyodor Mikhailovich ... to death by shooting....' The people in the crowd cross themselves, but 'it is all a deception', the prisoners think numbly. 'They cannot mean to kill us.' Yet, there are the stakes and the priest holding the silver crucifix out for them to kiss.

Perhaps, some of them are contemptuous, sneering at the mumbojumbo, and those who go first stride arrogantly in spite of the snow as they are led hooded and pinioned, to the stakes. Dostoyevsky embraces his friends.

'Ready!' The firing-squad level their rifles. 'Take aim!'

They brace against the post for the tearing of the bullets. Yet nothing happens and there is an officer spurring his horse forward waving a document like a wand.

'Ground arms!' The poised rifles come down again and somebody is reading once more, the titles tumbling monotonously into the cold air. 'We, by the Grace of God, Emperor and Autocrat of all Russia, Moscow, Kiev, Vladimir, Novgorod, Tsar of Poland and Siberia, Grand Duke of Smolensk ... Estonia, Duke of Finland....'

The prisoners shiver with cold and tension, listening in the darkness of the hoods. 'We in our infinite mercy and clemency ordain that the sentence shall be remitted.... Petrashevsky ... penal exile to Siberia for a period of twenty years.... Grigoryev ... fifteen years.'

'Perhaps, it would be better to shoot us,' one mutters.

'Dostoyevsky Fyodor Mikhailovich, to penal exile in

Siberia for four years and thereafter to service as a soldier. . . .'

The cold sunlight glints on the cupolas of the Trinity Cathedral. There is a clanking of chains, the prisoners hobble and stumble awkwardly. 'Farewell, my friends. Regret nothing. Ahead lie the long march towards the east, penal exile.' *(Notes from a Dead House.)*

The phantoms of the past reach out, but for a while are dissolved by the twinkling fountains of Petrodvorets. The garden stretches from the Summer Palace all the way to the sea and hundreds of fountains splash happily among the flower beds and the statuary. The nazi invasion played havoc here, but all damage has been restored to exactly as it looked before the Great Patriotic War, before the Revolution, as the tsars and tsarinas had left it. From room to room in the Summer Palace, full of gilded furniture behind barriers of cord, ornate settees and chairs *à la* the French Louises, one must walk in special felt slippers supplied at the entrance in order to protect the floors.

There is a story that when the Soviet troops moved in to defend the Summer Palace during the siege of Leningrad, the resident caretaker had demanded that the soldiers remove their nailed boots. The commander decided the demand was ridiculous, considering the artillery bombardment taking place. But the old man was adamant: nobody was going to spoil *his floors.* The commander finally surrendered and the Red Armymen manned the palace in stockinged feet.

Among the leaping fountains I was surrounded by a trio of Gypsy women, shawls, blouses and long skirts all appearing worn and mouths flashing new-looking gold teeth in their dark faces. They insisted on telling my fortune gabbling in heavily accented Russian. One of them carried a baby wrapped up like a parcel in linen and tied with blue tape. I had to cross a palm with silver in the timeless tradition: one coin was not enough and a cheerful haggling ensued. The one elected to read my hand peered into it, stuck her tongue in her cheek, frowned, shook her head, smiled, nodded. She rattled off in Russian, gesticulating at me while Victor translated, and then

they all laughed and made off to the shrubbery and the flower beds with the swaddled infant.

I had always been both sceptical, though curious about what I would hear if I ever ventured to have my palm read. One avoided the fun-fair booths where Madame This or Madame That lurked behind bead curtains in her cheap imitation finery and muttered about 'long journeys' and 'strangers crossing one's path' against the background of carnival music. But this was the 'real thing', genuine Gypsies, while in the distance children screamed with joy under the splashing fountains and at the end of the garden the gulf greyly heaved with Finland in the distance.

It would take days to see everything in the Hermitage. The ghosts of the masters stand at your shoulder, while you peer at their works and, probably, look affronted because you have to miss out a lot, because there is no time. It is the same thing with all vast galleries; you have to make up your mind beforehand what you want to see in the Prado in Madrid or the Louvre. A museum can bore you, but with a big art gallery you are always worried that you might have missed the best and you go away with a nagging feeling that you should have left out one display in order to have time to see another.

The phantoms of the past reach out again: the old *Aurora* still anchored on the Neva and the sailors' ghosts stand by the guns. Across the river in the city there is a crowd around the Smolny Institute, the former school for young ladies of the nobility. Figures hurry in and out of the entrance, pushing past the armed crowd, the bayonetted rifles gleaming in the fine rain–or is it snowing? The Petrograd Red Guards are assembling, the workers from the Putilov Works and other places, sailors, soldiers. It is the dark evening of November 7 in the new style, and there is a wary quietness in the air.

Orders are coming: one unit goes here and another there, this one remains here to guard the headquarters, that one is sent to the Summer Garden. Voices clamour for news. 'The Provisional Government is in session at the Winter Palace. They have put up barricades around the whole building and they are held by the Cadets and the women's death battalion.'

A cannon crashes from a ship on the river. The cruiser signals the start for the storming of the Winter Palace. Cheering, and a torrent of people tumbles towards the Winter Palace. The units are all mixed up now, soldiers, sailors, armed workers pushing and thrusting ahead. The attack on the Winter Palace is launched from all sides. The Provisional Government hopes that reinforcements will arrive to save them.

In the wet the attackers surge across the cobble-stones, stream from the arches, under the fire of the Cadets. The Cadets have good cover behind the barricades and their rifle and machine-gun fire rains on the attackers. The attackers have reached the Alexander Column, others are pressing in from all sides. Another cheer and the centre of the barricade is stormed. The Red detachments are climbing the barricades, thrusting with bayonets, firing into the defenders, slipping on the embrasures, tumbling over. The great iron gates are burst open and the torrent pours in, shouting and cheering. It bursts through doorways and pursues the fleeing Cadets along the corridors. Stairway after stairway, storey after storey, and the Cadets snipe back futilely, overrun by the attack.

Somebody wrenches his fur cap from his head and waves it wildly: 'The Provisional Government is under arrest!'

The ministers are led out under guard, past the triumphant revolutionaries. They gaze around hopelessly at their defeated troops being disarmed, and are taken away.

We drove up to the Kirov Stadium. The day was clear and crisp. From there the buses and trucks along the Nevsky Prospekt are like toys. The old French-and-Italian style city and the newly built blocks mingle, running down to the gulf where the ferries set out for Finland. On the walls of older buildings there were still wartime signs, which warned the citizens to keep away from that side of the street, because the German shells were apt to land there.*

* Warning signs dating back to the Second World War have been left deliberately on some houses as a reminder of the wartime ordeal.–*Ed.*

Under the Field of Mars the dead of the Revolution lay in resounding silence; green grass and grey granite of the mass graves hold down their ghosts and leave only the memories of heroism, determined courage and confidence in a new life.

2. The Footsteps of Alexander

Below the cotton-wool clouds, South-Eastern Russia skimmed away and one sensed the cities dropping behind ten thousand metres below, the flat green on a relief map giving way to the yellow and umber of rising country, the Urals passing on the left, replaced by the prairies of Kazakhstan beyond Uralsk, the Aral Sea somewhere beneath, rinsing the head of the Uzbek Soviet Socialist Republic. Through the gaps in the clouds the rows of trackless mountains of the Pamir range, ragged, the peaks scattered with springtime snow glint like sugar in the evening sun, and the Tajik Republic rose into sight out of Central Asia.

Into Central Asia

Before 1917, the peoples of Russia were dispersed in widely different levels of economic, political and cultural development, and outside European Russia, few formed real nations–many lived a nomadic life, their economy, social relations and culture dominated by a patriarchal-feudal system.

Experience of Soviet life showed that such differences were no obstacle to their eventual unification within a single state, and that socialism enabled once backward peoples to catch up quickly with the advanced.

In the 1920s, the Soviet Communist Party had worked out the lines for development. Assistance to any particular republic or region was to be specifically related to the prevailing economic relations and way of life of the people who lived there. As far as the eastern hinterlands were concerned it was to be borne in mind that each of them was a world of its own, with its own ways, customs and economy. Soviet bodies, Lenin insisted, were to adapt themselves to the level of these peasant countries.

The creation of national states in Central Asia was an example of how Soviet power was adapted to the needs of building socialism in the backward regions. The establishment of the Uzbek and Turkmen Union republics, and the initial Tajik and Kirghiz autonomous republics (they became Union republics later) promoted the growth of national consciousness among those who lived in them and their development into socialist nations.

Simultaneously, the Soviet state invested huge sums in the economic and cultural development of the backward regions. The first step was to redistribute material resources from the economically advanced to the backward nationalities. But redistribution was not enough. Central Asia had to be industrialised–and quickly. The industrially developed areas in Central Russia and the Ukraine served as the basis for this. The Eastern republics did not have the necessary funds, hence money was provided from the national budget. At the same time, most of the rural population in Central Asia was freed from taxes for five years.

Collectivisation of agriculture played a major part in the socialist transformation of Central Asia. This was preceded first by land and water reform, the redistribution of pasture and the confiscation of the property of the semi-feudal rich. The patriarchal way of life had to be turned into a small-commodity economy, and the nomads had to begin a settled life. Collectivisation was to be, for the bulk of the backward peoples, a jump from small-commodity production to socialism.

The backward hinterland became modern industrial-agrarian republics without going through a capitalist stage, and caught up with the more advanced nations of the USSR. Tajikistan, coming up towards the belly of the plane, was part of this hinterland.

The plane was crowded and there was a chatter of Russian and Turkic accents as the wheels came down. A young sailor, moustached and nineteen years old, was going home for the wedding of a relative. Because he had not been able to get leave at the time planned, they had put off the marriage so he could be there. He showed me the badges on his blouse: one for success in sport, another

designating him a first-class specialist in some naval duty. Dushanbe Airport bounced against us and we rolled towards the gateway to the Tajik Soviet Socialist Republic.

Tajikistan is one of the smaller Soviet republics huddled on the southernmost boundary of the USSR, roughly squashed between Kirghizia in the north and Afghanistan which makes a dent in its belly below. On the map it roughly forms the shape of a horse galloping into Uzbekistan, its head flung back.

Here the Pamir mountains meet the Hindu Kush and Sary Kol range of the Tien Shan. The inaccessible peaks and eternal snow crowd into Tajikistan, rugged mountains pile against the skyline of the high Pamirs. Marco Polo coming up from the South wrote of this region, the highest place in the world: 'Here is the best pasturage in the world; for a lean beast grows fat here in ten days... there are also innumerable wolves.... This plain, whose name is Pamir, extends fully twelve days journey.... No birds fly here because of the height and the cold.'

There were signs that the Tajik Republic was still celebrating its 50th anniversary which had taken place the year before. People were still wearing the lapel badges with a number fifty on them and in the streets of Dushanbe there were still hoardings and bunting left over.

In the 4th century B. C. Alexander the Great marched his mixed army of Macedonians, Greeks and Persians into what was called Bactria and Sogdiana, conquering these areas in spite of the staunch resistance by the locals. Two centuries later the state of Tocharistan emerged on the territory of former Bactria. Afterwards Tocharistan and Sogdiana along with other regions became part of the Kuchean Empire.

The Saracens, Arabs, came in the 7th and 8th centuries, overrunning the region under the green banner of Islam. In 874, the Samanids took over and built up a powerful feudal state, holding power over all the country from Central Asia to the Persian Gulf, and from India to Baghdad. It was during this period that Tajiks became a nation and the Tajik language became predominant in the area. Tajik literature, art and science flourished. Rudagi, founder of Tajik-Persian classical literature; Abu-Ali ibn-

Sina, called Avicenna by Westerners, a scientist, lived then.

In the second half of the 19th century, tsarist Russia annexed Central Asia, administering the Tajik region through the Turkestan Governor-General and the Bukhara Emirate. In the grip of local rulers as well as the tsar, however, the vast area of Central Asia was rapidly drawn into Russia's economic orbit. But this also meant association with Russia's revolutionary movement. In 1918, the Bukhara Communist Party was formed. In August 1920, the working people of Bukhara rose and by September 1 overthrew the feudal system, forming the Bukhara People's Soviet Republic in early October.

Some of the territory of Eastern Bukhara was captured by Turkey's Enver Pasha, who instituted a reign of terror, plundering and murdering, burning villages and farms. After the counter-revolutionaries and interventionists had been defeated the Bukhara People's Soviet Republic became a socialist republic.

In October 1924, the Communist Party and the Soviet Government decided to divide Central Asia on national lines in accordance with the wishes of the local people. The Tajik people were given the right to form an autonomous Soviet socialist republic within the framework of the Uzbek SSR. Since then October 14 is observed as the day of founding the Tajik Republic. By decree of the Third Extraordinary All-Tajik Congress of Soviets held in October 1929 it was transformed into a Union Republic.

When we came down to the hotel restaurant, the atmosphere was noisy and gay. All the tables were occupied, but the floor manageress found us a place. Dark, moustached men gazed curiously at me over bottles of mineral water and the left-overs of cognac on the tables under the dimmed lights. Beyond them the orchestral group plied its electric equipment with gusto, a crooner sang sentimentally of love. When the singer finished, the band broke into a traditional tune, the electric guitars replaced by drums and pipes, while a girl in a silver mini-dress led a wild folk dance to the clapping and whistling of the customers. As more joined in the whirling dance, the air throbbed with the drums and flutes, until it ended breath-

lessly, and the electric organ, saxophones and trumpets came on again with the theme from the film *The Godfather.* Dancers clung to each other in a tired cadence.

In the Soviet Union people are as unorthodox about formal dancing as the youth of the West are about modern. Women dance together as partners in old waltzes and fox-trots when none of the opposite sex are available; men will go up to any unintroduced woman in a hall or restaurant to ask her to dance. One got the impression that dancing at all age levels was for relaxation and entertainment first, without involving old-fashioned divisions of the sexes.

It was the first stage of this journey and beyond my hotel room the night was hot and starless, there was no breeze over Dushanbe. My host Massud Mullojanov, who was the editor of a local literary magazine, had been somewhat unintelligible over the roar of the restaurant music. We had left after a late dinner, while a group of women sang together at the next table, and had agreed to meet the next day.

The tap in the bathroom belched and splashed taking me unawares. The water hummed and gurgled in the pipes. I went to bed and read some of the long-neglected *Ramayana* before dropping off to sleep.

The Monday City

In the morning the sky suddenly became grey and the mountains disappeared in mist. In the street below children in white shirts and red scarves were on their way to school. We did not have breakfast in the buffet because the morning queues were too long and took it in the restaurant of the night before, deserted now except for setting things out for the coming day. I settled for unexotic fried eggs and compensated with *kefir** boiled in the Ukrainian way. I had time to kill until eleven o'clock when I was to meet some writers at the local union, so my interpreter Larissa Borisovna and I went for a stroll.

Outside the hotel a sign announced that 'season tickets

* A variety of yoghourt.–*Ed.*

for public transportation in Dushanbe will be available from March 1'. In the square girls in cerise silk trousers passed, carrying briefcases. Coloured trousers and traditional dresses in their multicoloured patterns mingled with mini-skirts. *Tyubeteikas,* the embroidered skull-caps, made brilliant dots bobbing in the groups around the street kiosks.

On Lenin Prospekt the trolleybuses trundled past the pink-and-white apartment blocks, the elm and fir trees, heading towards Aini Square and the large Opera and Ballet Theatre. In the square old men in turbans and long quilted coats dozed as the mist lifted and the sun came out and in the distance, behind the opera house, where they were advertising *Madame Butterfly,* the grey-brown hills came into view.

The offices of the railway workers' Communist Party organisation were located in a rectangular building fronted by a green lawn and elm trees, and from a window a young man stared with the usual curiosity at a visiting foreigner. A red-and-white billboard outside said: 'Railway workers of this district pledge to increase output by 4.5 million rubles as their contribution to the current five-year plan.'

On a corner a group of muscular young girls in denim jeans waited to cross the road. They were members of a volleyball team arriving from an outlying village to take part in a tournament. They smiled rosily and explained that they were a mixture of workers and schoolgirls and then hurried to beat the lights, chattering and lugging their hold-alls, healthily nubile.

The veil associated with subjected Eastern women was nowhere to be seen, neither on old or young. The dark horsehair *yashmak* that covered the face and body has become a museum piece, but discarding it was a brave act in the early days of emancipation.

In old times women had been virtual slaves to their husbands, confined to their homes for most of their lives. All this had been sanctified by religion. Now they were equal citizens of the USSR and had the same rights as men in all spheres of economic, cultural and socio-economic life.

In the 1920s, the counter-revolutionary, fanatical bands of *basmachi*,* backed by feudal patrons, had often beheaded women who had thrown off the veil. Now the colourful national costumes prevailed, but the *yashmak* was gone forever.

Dushanbe lay in the Gishar Valley among the mountains in the long May morning. For many centuries the trade routes connecting Central Asia with India passed through here. Camel caravans, swaying heavy with goods for trade, set out from Bukhara on Friday and on the following Monday made their stop-over here for the fair that would attract villagers from the surrounding hills. Those fairs were called *'Djushambe'* which is Tajik for Monday and the name now designated the collection of adobe huts that made up the village that was to become this capital.**

When Soviet power came to the Pamirs in 1922, the population of Djushambe Village had been about one hundred, occupying a scattering of huts surrounding the tea-house and an opium den. In this place there are now the library of the Republic with two million books and ancient manuscripts, and all the buildings in traditional Tajik and Russian style. The population had grown to 436,000 with 40,000 students attending the university, the agricultural institute, the polytechnic and teachers' training college and the medical school. Another sixteen thousand young people went to twelve technical schools for specialised secondary education, and the city's one hundred general educational schools were attended by ninety thousand children.

Here and there one came across one of the twenty research institutes where young and middle-aged in the embroidered skull-caps, traditional dresses or modern casuals and suits, studied astrophysics, seismology, chemistry or Orientology among the rose beds and orderly parks. The textile-machine factory manufactured equipment for Europe, Tunisia and Lebanon.

* For a number of years after the October Revolution the *basmachi*, aided from outside by imperialist quarters, tried to defeat Soviet power in the Central Asian Soviet republics. They used terrorist tactics, destroyed irrigation canals, set fire to crops, and the like.–*Ed.*

** The spelling 'Dushanbe' was adopted in 1961.–*Ed.*

One thought of Alexander's tired troops in the mountain valleys, the tinkle of camel bells, the *mullahs* who had been the few endowed with literacy, the raiding *basmachi* bands, all retreated now behind the veil of the dusty past.

When we got back to the hotel Massud was waiting with a car to drive us around. The driver was a young man in a blue denim suit in the style of American cowboys.

Writers

'Many writers here devote their works to the history of Tajikistan,' somebody said, 'mostly, to the revolutionary and post-revolutionary period.'

Everybody needed to say something. In the company were comrades from the Afro-Asian Solidarity Committee and the Writers Union. I remember a poet named Mirsaid Mirshakar *(Lenin in the Pamirs)*, comrades Karimov, Rakhim-zadeh, Ikrami, Mukhumali Rajad. The Turkic–or Arabian?–names lay romantically on the tongue: one thought of medieval Moors, Harun al-Rachid, Saladin. But this was Soviet Tajikistan, the camel trains had gone and the Aeroflot flight from Moscow came in regularly; the railway through the mountains to Dushanbe had been constructed in 1929, but helicopters crossed the ranges too; the oranges came by ship and train from Morocco.

'Also books about the Great Patriotic War.'

More than fifty thousand Tajik officers and men won orders and medals, and forty-nine became Heroes of the Soviet Union. The war had also brought large industrial enterprises. During those years collective and state farmers delivered over 507,000 tons of raw cotton to the state, along with grain, meat and dairy produce. The Soviet Government decorated 102,000 Tajik men and women for their contribution to the war effort. About 120 million rubles donated by the people went into building tanks and aircraft.

'They also deal with modern topics,' somebody else said against the clink of mineral water bottles, cups and the rustle of the wrappings from the chocolates that came

with the coffee. 'Like the building of the hydroelectric station on the Vakhsh River. That forms the background to several works. But we haven't produced any great books yet, a lot of poems and novelettes, but no great books. The problem might be that when a writer visits some great project for material he becomes the slave of only what he sees and so he can't perceive everything.'

Tajiks have a great tradition of folk dancing, instrumental music, solo singing and poetry. Prose, drama, children's literature only came with the Soviet era, as did cinema, symphony music and the professional theatre.

'At first it was difficult to reconcile traditional ideas with modern achievements,' a woman in the company said. 'That applied to almost everything. There was a time when people were afraid of electricity, of the radio. Now there are even TV sets in the mosques.' She laughed, 'Old people are no longer afraid of planes–they prefer flying to trains.'

Both Tajik and Russian are used in schools. The children can go to a Russian first-language school or a Tajik first-language one, the choice belongs to the children and parents. At official functions Tajik, Russian and Uzbek are used with simultaneous translation: this is provided by the constitution. The difficulty is to find teachers who speak and teach all the languages, as well as additional foreign languages like English, French and Arabic.

The conversation inevitably drifted back to the emancipation of women; nowadays it was unavoidable, and after all this was International Women's Year. In Tajikistan parliament there were 33 per cent of women and 50 per cent in local Soviets. Two comrades present mentioned with pride that each had a daughter at the State Art Academy, studying to be composers of music.

Even among the writing fraternity the politeness and ceremony of Soviet society had not been forgotten. I was presented with a 50th anniversary commemorative medal and everybody shook my hand, bidding me welcome back at any time.

Against the background of the hazy mountains the monument to Rudagi, turbaned, bearded and robed like a figure from Mosaic times, gestured with a stone hand as if

he were reciting. But at my hotel I had only a volume of a later work by another from across the border, Kazakh Abai, and the 1000 B. C. Sanskrit epic, the *Ramayana*, in a condensed English version. The stone face did not seem to mind: they were, after all, of the same profession.

The mist had lifted and we were shaking hands by the rose beds, and the *chinar* trees were bright green in the sun opposite the Friendship House. We were joined by a Tajik war veteran, who had fought on the Byelorussian front. His jacket hung with medals.

Tea-House and Ballet

In the central *chaighana*, the tea-house, citizens in turbans and skull-caps, sashed quilted coats and city suits, sat at the tables and drank from porcelain bowls. The building opened onto the street and the aroma of Oriental cooking hung in the air outside. People jostled each other on the side-walk and the trolleybuses lumbered on below the second-floor balcony, where there were more people eating and drinking. One wondered why, in the Soviet Union, the workers' state, there were so many people bustling around or relaxing in restaurants and cafés during normal working hours, until one realised that many projects operated on the shift system.

Massud was saying: 'Here's a young friend of mine.'

This was a young man with a shy face and a name something like Yuradik Nazriyev. 'He's a clever fellow,' Massud smiled. 'He works at the Institute of Oriental Languages. Not only that, but he is an actor and a singer on the side.'

The young man looked embarrassed, shaking hands amid the tables with the piled crockery, spilled rice, and elderly turbaned men looking at us over the tea bowls.

'I'm having a break for dinner,' he said. 'Is this your first time in Dushanbe?'

'No. I came once with my wife on a short visit. This time I'm working.'

He had recently defended his dissertation for the Master of Science degree. Besides that it turned out he was a popular actor and musician too. One saw that many of the customers of the *chaighana* knew him.

'I do both folk and classical music,' he said. Besides that he was a member of the local Komsomol and was waiting for admission into the Party; his wife was a journalist and they had a girl of two years and a son of six months. 'A busy life,' he smiled.

'Tell me about the wedding,' I said.

'Oh, it was a Red wedding, a Komsomol wedding,' he said. Nowadays most young couples were married at the local Palace of Weddings. In the villages there were still traditional marriages, except often there was no *mullah.* 'The celebrations take the traditional form, I mean, but there is no religion in most cases.'

The people accepted the Communist Party and the Soviet Government as their own, he said. 'They know, and especially old folk, that in the old days it was the Communists who were the first to lead, to make sacrifices. They were in all the trouble spots, fighting backwardness. Where there were difficulties, they, Communists and Komsomols, always came to help, putting the people's welfare before themselves.'

Many Communist activists and technicians came to Central Asia from the advanced nations of the Soviet Union. It was a matter of sharing the material resources of the whole family of Soviet nations. The Russian Federation and the Ukraine sent not only engineers, miners, metallurgists, farming experts and builders, but also teachers, scientists, doctors and artists.

Neither did it mean the 'Russification' of the East. At the Congress of 1923, the Communist Party made it clear: 'All Soviet bodies must use the native languages in all dealings with local populations belonging to other nationalities and minorities. Any violator of national rights should be prosecuted and punished. All languages had to have equal status and every citizen must have the right to speak any of them and raise his children and have them educated in their chosen tongue.'

That night it rained, but we went to the State Opera and Ballet Theatre named after Aini, to see *Leili and Mejnun,* one of the ballets based on folk tales. This one had music by Balasanyan, and was again the story of unrequited love.

Leili's father has, in the old way, married her off to Ibn Salom the villain, danced by Karmilin, though she is in love with Mejnun (Burkhanov). The pleading of the unhappy bride (Sabirova) is in vain and after an evening of mingled classical and stirring folk dancing, the disconsolate and heartbroken heroine dies, while the rest of the cast pass mournfully into the wings.

It was a colourful and professional performance; one realised that provincial ballet in the Soviet Union can compete easily with the better-known Kirov and Bolshoi. Burkhanov and Sabirova mixed artistry with professionalism in their *pas de deux* and the uproarious folk dances blazed with colour. One forgot even to hiss the villain. But in the end everybody was reconciled at the footlights and the applause crackled enthusiastically, bouquets were brought onto the stage to the reunited cast by children, and everybody realised that after all it had only been make-believe.

Outside the theatre the sky dripped in the darkness and people huddled at bus stops on Lenin Prospekt. The bus to the hotel was packed–they never leave you standing in the rain, no matter how jammed the transport. Passengers passed their fares and tickets one to the other on the way to and from the ticket machines. Dushanbe hissed by in the rain, dark and tree-lined.

To Nurek

In the hotel lobby a group of young West Germans eddied in and out of islands of haversacks and duffel bags. Outside the weather was grey and muggy and the mountains were out of sight, lurking behind the screen of mist.

A man already in his cups–an early drinker–swayed up to me and made gestures as if he needed a few more kopecks, possibly to buy another shot. He did not seem to belong to the hotel and another, fiercely moustached, glowered at him indignantly so that he moved off, teetering towards the heavy plate-glass doors. The West German visitors were dispersing towards the lifts.

The grandmother of our driver from the day before

had died suddenly and so he was not on duty. He was replaced by a burly and genial-looking fellow who shook hands with everyone and smilingly assured us that many years with Intourist had given him experience with foreign visitors. He went by the name of Alec Madonis, though I gathered that Alec was the Anglicised version of the original Tajik. He was chatty all the way as we drove out of the city, bubbling over with praise of his family, life in Tajikistan; jovially remarked on the bad weather, the late spring, the fact that hail had damaged the cotton harvest earlier that year. He seemed to see jollity in everything.

'We have five children now,' he chortled, as we waited for a line of women with shopping bags to pass. 'One for each year of the present five-year plan. I want ten children, so the rest will come in accordance with the next plan.'

His wife worked in a factory and since his hours as a driver were irregular he did a lot of the household chores, though, he admitted chuckling, 'Certainly, I am not very useful in the house'. Mrs. Madonis earned 80 rubles a month and received another 60 from the state for the children. He was paid 120 rubles for his chauffeuring.

We drove south from Dushanbe towards the mountains. The uncompleted housing projects at the city's edge went by, bearded men out of the Arabian Nights pottered in suburban gardens, a self-service petrol station smelled of carbon monoxide; newly cultivated cottonfields rolled past and a woman drove a cow by the roadside.

'We also have a cow,' Madonis said. 'That helps too.'

Women in national dress dotted the distant fields like far-off flowers and the Scheherazade people became more frequent in the countryside. Madonis explained that Soviet cotton had a shorter thread than Egyptian, but that it could grow under the most severe weather conditions.

'The best grapes come from here too,' Massud said. 'It is not uncommon for people to enjoy a meal of bread and grapes.'

At a bus stop typically blonde Russians waited, all of them wearing Tajik dress. Many Russian families descended from the early settlers have been absorbed into

the Tajik community, adopting the customs, language and dress of the local population.

We crossed the Kafirnigan River into the Ordjonikidze district. A village was decorated with red flags and elderly people drank tea outside the local tea-house. Beyond the green foothills the mountains looked black.

We climbed the green foothills and rolled past another village, new cottages and the residue of old-time adobe mud walls crumbling away. The hills were green and brown and beyond them the heavy grey clouds hid the mountain tops.

Big twelve-wheeled trucks went by dragging trailers and loaded with building material, heading towards the mountains. A village perched on a brown cliff. Below the top of the foothills the countryside lay like a rumpled green carpet, and through drizzle the road climbed into the cultivated hills of more green, brown and khaki. A herd of sheep grazed in a canyon and to the left the far-off Pamirs were covered in grey clouds.

We went by the state farmlands and up 1,600 metres into the grey mist. Now the land was invisible in the heavy mist except for khaki-coloured boulders here and there. The rain fell heavily along the road winding through the high mountains; a village huddled brown and dirty white in the falling rain. Down a cutting and into a valley and the fog lifted and we saw the road wriggling and zigzagging ahead past black boulders, khaki earth, maroon hillsides topped with green.

Massud said: 'Perhaps we could call this the year of grass for the cattle.'

'If it wasn't so wet I would load some for my cow,' the driver said.

At the side of the road a monument had been erected for a truck-driver washed away during bad weather. We bumped along a stretch of brown gravel. On a hillside a *chaban*, a shepherd, in a plastic raincoat watched our car driving past in the drizzle. A man in a duffel coat, carrying a spade, strolled at the edge of the road dropped into a wide, wet valley through which tumbled the Vakhsh River. Now the landscape was dotted with sheep and cattle. A new village, white-roofed cottages, lay in an orderly ar-

rangement on the right of the big valley. The river leaped and hurdled the boulders, foaming creamy white between the slopes. This area also supplied water to Uzbekistan. In the old days (pre-revolutionary times were 'the old days') the Uzbeks had to buy water from here where state farms had now grown up and new ones were being born in the Nurek Valley.

We drove past the continuing signs of development in the valley: workshops and sheds, piles of excavation, stocks of beams and girders, an obelisk proclaiming the 50th anniversary of the Republic, a newly laid Friendship Garden.

An old man in a turban and top boots rode by on a mule. Trucks, cars, machinery roared in the dull rain and Nurek town bumped into sight, blocks of flats, department stores, buses. It was exactly midday.

The River Tamers

We were now high up in the mountains and the town seemed to have been placed there by a giant's hand. We went on through the town in the rain, past the blocks of flats and the Palace of Culture in the unfinished square, the department store and the displayed portraits of crack building workers, the labour heroes, ranked at the entrance to the dam works. The rain dripped from the blown-up portraits like sweat from the faces of Titans. Past the sheds and machine shops again, red and white slogans, into another outskirt of piled steel girders and piles of brown earth turning into mud, as if some giant infants had made a playground there, building sand castles. Trucks and the Soviet version of jeeps bucked and lurched everywhere and we left Nurek town behind for a while, the big Volga car stumbling between the piles of rubble, while the rain hissed around us.

The production of electric power to form the basis of industrial development was making rapid progress now, thanks to the gigantic natural reserves. The rivers of Tajikistan offer excellent opportunities for the construction of hydroelectric stations, especially on the Vakhsh River.

The first hydroelectric station went up in the 1930s on the Varzob River near Dushanbe. Soon after that another station was opened in Khorog in the Pamirs. In 1949, two more on the Varzob. The next one was Kairak Kum (the Peoples' Friendship Hydroelectric Station) and then the stations on the Vakhsh Canal and on the Vakhsh itself. Most of the electricity generated is used by industry and about one-third by agriculture, including that used by electrically powered irrigation machines.

Lenin considered electrification as the basis for the construction of a new society. It was on his instructions that in the first years of Soviet power the GOELRO Plan (the State Plan for the Electrification of Russia) was worked out, starting the full-scale industrialisation of the country. The GOELRO Plan, drawn up for ten to fifteen years, provided for the construction of 30 power stations (20 thermal and 10 hydro) in different economic regions.

The world pricked up its ears at the news. Far-sighted and progressive scientists hailed the attempt. A well-known American engineer, Charles Steinmetz, wrote to Lenin offering his services. Others claimed that such a backward country as Russia could not be electrified. Pioneer sci-fi writer H. G. Wells wrote in his book *Russia in the Shadows* of 'the dreamer in the Kremlin'. Lenin the good Marxist who denounced utopianism has succumbed at last to a utopia of electricians. 'I cannot see anything of the sort happening in this dark crystal ball of Russia, but this little man at the Kremlin can; he sees the decaying railways replaced by new electric transport, sees new roadways spreading throughout the land, sees a new and happier communist industrialism arising again....'*

The predictions of that master of fantasy who depicted in his novels the technical progress of the future world proved wrong.

By the end of the GOELRO decade the assignment for building up the capacities of power stations had been carried out. Their aggregate capacity had risen by 150 per cent.

* H. G. Wells, *Russia in the Shadows*, London, p. 87.

The exotic names of power giants appeared on the map of the Soviet Union: Zemo Avchala on the Kura River in the Caucasus; the Dnieper in the Ukraine. Only the nazi invasion interrupted the work and the USSR's generating capacity was thrown back to the level of 1934. But the 'age of the restoration' came for dam-building and electrification. The post-war stage of development of the Soviet power industry was the creation of complexes of stations on the largest rivers: Volga, Kama, Dnieper. Six stations on the Dnieper. Bigger still, the Volzhskaya, opened in 1960 near Volgograd. Irkutsk and Bratsk; Ust-Ilimsk, on the Angara; Krasnoyarsk on the Yenisei, the giants who tamed rivers were reborn.

Although hydropower stations give relatively cheaper electricity, they are more expensive and take two to five times longer to build. For this reason, to obtain the greatest possible increase in power production as quickly as possible, the construction of thermal stations was increased, particularly as new large deposits of gas and oil, and substantial stocks of coal lying on the surface were discovered in many regions.

The introduction of powerful generators and the linking of electric power stations into large territorial grids greatly reduced the construction and power production costs.

Today, the Soviet Union ranks second in the world for the production of electricity, generating more than Britain, West Germany, France, Sweden and Austria put together. The principal task facing the Soviet power industry is to establish a single power grid for the whole country. Power systems considerably increase the reliability of power supply and enable power stations to co-operate. High-voltage lines carry electricity over long distances so that energy produced at one spot can be used in localities far removed from it; thus, railways are freed from the need to transport vast amounts of fuel. In 1973 alone, an additional thousand kilometres of railways were electrified.

The rain continued to fall and the mountains were a sodden green and grey, and the sturdy Volga limousine clawed its way towards the Nurek Hydroelectric Power

Station that was nearing completion. This was where Blanche* and I had seen the beginnings of the dam in 1970: a myriad of men and women scurrying like ants in the river canyon, where one, at certain places, could jump from one bank to the other. Now a vast gorge had been gouged to enclose the gigantic reservoir and an immense rampart of earthworks had been thrown across to hold back the once booming waters of the Vakhsh and still it to mild and stippled tranquillity in the heavy rain. In a short time this section of the tumultuous river had been broken like a wild Valkyrian stallion to be harnessed by a Titan who was really a host of little men and smiling girls in plastic hardhats and muddy overalls and boots. The women had tamed the river along with the men, though they were not allowed to work underground; one wondered at the thought that there might be such a thing as benevolent sexual discrimination.

The great waters hung above us, silent in the rain, behind the rampart of earth, and only from an outlet a gush of water hissed, green and foam-white, like peppermint-cream soda.

The dam, though uncompleted, was already producing one-third of its intended quota of electricity. Inside the angular concrete control section the computers in operation, overseen by a young woman in a white coat, clicked and flickered and hummed, ticking off the kilowatt-hours being produced.

The deputy chief director of the project was Vladlen Khramov, who looked more like a director of a company than of a soggy, mud-churning project littered with discarded metal, piles of machinery, blocks of concrete. He gave me a hardhat and pulled a plastic raincoat over his neat suit, laughingly welcoming me and my retinue from Dushanbe.

'Where'll you go after this job is done?' I asked him as we trooped away in the drizzle.

'Oh, somewhere where they need another dam,' he replied, steering me towards Station Number 3. 'I'll wait and see.'

* Author's wife.–*Ed.*

'Doesn't your family feel like nomads, travelling from one project to another?' He had been on projects in Siberia and elsewhere. 'Well, it takes a long time to build a dam,' Vladlen Khramov said laughing; he was full of smiles and laughter as if he enjoyed supervising the erection of mighty projects. 'So we stay on one place for a long time. One doesn't notice the moving so much.'

At last we were descending into sheltered passages and terraces. In a great well below us massive cylindrical machinery hummed. The stairways, passages and the terraces were all lined in marble; there were even stands holding plants and flowers! The marble halls contained extensions of the computer system that clicked and flickered. Deep down, as if into the thundering guts of a giant, metal intestines of a man-made regurgitation of infinite power. The humming and roaring became deafening, cascading down spiral staircases around pyramids of machinery; it was a fantastic arrangement of pipes, cables, huge plates of curved steel, plugs, monster pumps, all orchestrating a cacophonic symphony. We passed still further down into the neon-lit depths to watch the first operating generator of the Nurek dam; along steel companionways and catwalks. We were 40 metres below the surface.

They had used 17,000 tons of metal the previous year, and had moved ten thousand million cubic metres of rubble to build the vast earthworks that formed the core of the completed dam. Now its surface was 98 square kilometres in area. Each generator weighed 548 tons. And everything had to be moved by truck, because of the mountainous terrain. This was the only hydroelectric station in the world to be built without railways.

When it is completed, only 412 people will be working the dam, including the cleaners.

I saw a close version of what this dam might look like completed, when I saw the one at Bratsk in Siberia: a vast futuristic edifice of rectangular barriers, water doors and locks interconnected, standing in awe-inspiring grandeur as a monument to man's conquest of nature, surrounded by acres of steel pylons and cables and porcelain insulators, an immense network of Martian proportions that outdid even the imagination of H. G. Wells who had

not believed that the Kremlin dreamer's dream would come true.

Back on the surface, the rain had slackened and Khramov insisted we go to the top of the *barrage* and so we set off, two cars bumping and slithering up the holed, rutted, temporary roadway. The big stubby trucks called 'elephants' were still hauling sections of concrete and massive parts of machinery up the slope.

From the top of the muddy rampart, the vast reservoir lay under the grey, ominous sky. The rain had receded to a drizzle. Already in the distance sailing boats were moored. Eventually there would be holiday resorts up here and a yacht basin, our host explained. But there was still work to be done. He smiled modestly at me, 'I hope you will mention our work in your book'. I still have the plastic hardhat from the Vakhsh River dam at Nurek.

The Hunting Mayor

The rain had stopped and the air was sharp with the clean smell of the mountains. We were parked in the square of Nurek town. The ornamental ponds were empty except for pools of rainwater. The square was being redesigned and the whole town still growing, but already the population was over 20,000, including the suburbs. It would drop to 15,000, as many of the dam-builders moved on. Lining the streets were the blocks of flats housing many of the workers in the light industries that had sprung up, together with motor repairs and jewellery-making.

We had gone to the offices of the Executive Committee for Nurek–what would otherwise be called the Town Hall. In one of the corridors a little red-blonde burst upon us, bubbling over with smiles that threatened to reach her ears. She was Nina and worked for Nurek radio and newspaper–and would I give her a few words. Downstairs on the side-walk we found the chief town architect.

He launched into an account of the future of this mountain town. The centre was going to be developed for the provision of services, a new cinema and department store, plus the new *Dom Kultury*, the inevitable House of Cul-

ture. The population in the future was likely to grow from 15,000 to 20,000 in the centre, spreading out into new suburbs, as the housing projects progressed, the architect explained with bewildering technicality. Figures, descriptions, measurements, dropped from his mind like an overflowing dam. The town, he said, was now twelve years old estimating from its first multi-storey building. Now it covered an area of 300 hectares and when the dam and reservoir were completed it would also become a holiday and recreation centre. Now the only communication with the outside was by road. I listened politely, lost in the forest of statistics: it was safer to remain on one spot.

The chief architect was a young man who had been allocated to Nurek after graduating from the Tajik Polytechnic in Dushanbe. That had been in 1970 and he'd come with his wife and two children.

'Don't you miss the big city?'

'Oh, we go into Dushanbe now and then, but we've grown to like it here—no crowds.'

Then there was the Mayor, or more officially the head of the town Executive, a pink, chubby-faced and portly oval man in a brown suit and a navy-blue hat, smiling with gold teeth as he met us on the veranda of the restaurant in the square where the architect led us.

A rotund and ebullient man, he outdid the architect in his account of Nurek, while we waited outside the restaurant, because they were setting a special table for a special guest of the town. They did not receive African writers often.

He had been in Nurek thirteen years, and had been the Mayor for twelve. 'I remember when there was no town here but two little *kishlaks* (villages), and the only work done was agricultural.' The local Party committee originated in the *kishlaks* and he had been a member since. 'Where the *Dom Kultury* now stands was a tiny store. The whole place was a morass and we had a little hut, which was considered the administration block. No electricity, no gas. We had an old tractor which functioned now and then. That was in 1962 and everything you see was built since then.'

He cut his conversation short to talk to two passing townspeople. They might have been old friends pausing for a casual chat. The two passersby flicked their hands in greeting and went on their way. 'We have great plans for the future,' the Mayor continued.

'What do you do when you're off duty?' I asked.

'Ah, hunt. I love hunting. Can you shoot?'

'I've never fired a shot, I'm afraid, much less handled a real gun. Except maybe an air rifle when I was a boy and a rusty revolver that had no hammer.'

'The mountains,' he gestured around, beyond the square, the *Dom Kultury*, the department store and the blocks of housing, all damp after the rain. 'We go often into the mountains.' Beyond the square the town sloped to the banks of the river. 'Up there, there's lots of game.' Across the river and into the trees, I thought. 'Soon we will also have boating and fishing.'

The chief architect had gone off a while since. A woman in paint-stained trousers went by while we talked. Two men tinkered with the innards of a jeep by the empty ornamental pool, and two old men in the quilted traditional coats, sashed at the waist, and turbaned crossed the square. Above the hills surrounding the town the clouds hung heavy and grey, the trees and scrub glistening dully with moisture. High up, on a peak, a portrait of Lenin outlined in neon lights symbolised that socialism had come into the mountains.

The table had been set in the restaurant and we had to devour a feast. 'People don't drink much–except maybe for the builders,' said the Mayor.

'Writers don't drink much either,' Larissa said and her brown eyes regarded me balefully from her Gypsy face.

There were several toasts: to me, to the Mayor, to the town, to the Communist Party, to the success of the dam, to peace, Afro-Asian solidarity, proletarian internationalism. A waitress kept coming and going and returning.

'Now,' the Comrade Hunting Mayor announced happily over the debris of the meal, 'we'll go visiting. You've been invited by a local couple. They have their lunch hour now.'

The mountain air was bracing, mind-clearing and we went along the street a few blocks. On the way 'His Wor-

ship' stopped to exchange a few words with a mother pushing a perambulator.

The ground floor flat where we arrived consisted of three rooms excluding the kitchen and the bath. We hung our hats and coats in the little hallway, ushered in by the Mayor, but were welcomed by a young and very pretty woman of those passionate Eastern looks, the thick black hair and honey-coloured skin and the luminous black eyes under black brows. She wore her traditional headscarf with a careless flair and her Tajik dress with ease, but there was a shyness behind the gleam of the dark eyes. She was Oisha, but she could have been Parveneh from Flecker's play *Hassan. 'Only on the hills of my country where the rolling sun of Heaven has his morning home, only on their windy hills do the women of my country go unveiled.'*

She gestured us shyly into the carpeted living-room: there were carpets on the floor, covering the sofa, hanging from the main unfurnished wall. She apologised that her husband was a little late, but we must make ourselves at home and not wait. From the tapestry-draped settee I gazed in awe and with a feeling of apprehension at the feast laid out on the long low table before us.

And she commenced to berate 'His Worship' for not having given her enough notice that visitors were to be expected. Here she was unprepared and nothing to offer but what she could manage to scrape together from the larder; given enough time she could have cooked a dinner; it would be all *his* fault if the visitors thought little of her hospitality; they would go away with a bad impression.

The Mayor listened dejectedly, smiling humbly, and glumly admitted he had picked on her, because she was the nearest. I could see him wishing the husband would appear. 'He is a keen hunter too,' he told us, hoping to change the subject.

Oisha hoped we would forgive her hasty preparations, and it was all the Mayor's fault. I wondered (a) whether our hostess now expected us to finish off the spread that certainly did not have the appearance of hastily gathered snacks, and (b) how many Mayors in the world could be

so taken down a peg with such lack of inhibition by a young firebrand of a citizeness. However, her criticism of Comrade Mayor held a friendly tone, though she gazed boldly at him while she delivered it. Having accepted her apologies we all began, though somewhat timidly after the restaurant.

Then there came Suleiman the husband, a young man with a sort of Latin American moustache. This cheered up the Mayor and, after introductions, 'His Worship' steered the conversation towards the hunting prospects this season.

With me slipping in a word here and there by way of Larissa, I learned that they had been married seven years and had two children, one at kindergarten. It turned out that Suleiman worked at the restaurant we had lately quit, and the handsome Oisha was a seamstress and worked at a dressmaking enterprise specialising for individual customers.

Suleiman and the Mayor were talking to each other about shotgun calibres and wild ducks when not needed by our side of the company. The questions and answers relieved me somewhat of the piles of canapés and *zakuski* (appetisers), the Eastern sweetmeats and a variety of other foods.

'I got married when I was eighteen,' Oisha said, pressing me on to try this, try that.

'You didn't think it too young?' I asked, balancing a plate on the recorder and holding a glass of tea at the same time.

The dark eyes regarded Suleiman. 'I've had a good life,' she said. 'We have good health, we have had good experiences most of our life together, and we live comfortably. Nature is beautiful here in the mountains and the town provides everything.'

'I can go hunting,' Suleiman declared. 'I grew up here, but Oisha lived in Dushanbe where we went to school together.' They had both completed secondary school.

'It was a Komsomol wedding,' Oisha told us. 'We're both Komsomols.' Usually at such weddings the fellow Young Communists chipped in and bought most of the household furniture for such young couples, and the

whole wedding celebration was prepared collectively. 'In the traditional weddings most of the expense fell on the husband.'

'What do you pay in rent?' I asked Suleiman.

He frowned. 'I don't know, ask Oisha, she holds the purse strings,' he said amid laughter.

'Eleven rubles eighty-five,' Oisha said promptly. 'Everything included, gas, electricity, water!' She earned 200 rubles a month as a skilled seamstress and 250 in winter. They worked for individual customers so all the garments were more or less exclusive. She had 18 working days' vacation a year.

Chickens cackled somewhere in the background. The Mayor was saying: 'One day I was up the mountain hunting in the woods, when a shotgun went off and almost blew my brains out. It was this rascal.'

'I thought he was a duck,' Suleiman said and they roared with laughter.

For the record, I said to Oisha: 'There is a lot of talk about equality of women. Do you have any comment?'

She dropped her eyes a little shyly. 'Well, there are a few small left-overs from the past. For instance, usually I would not sit in all-male company. We women would only appear in mixed company. But except for such small things, women have the same opportunities as men and are treated equally. I think some of the old people find that a little strange. I personally really don't have any complaints.'

The party broke up when Oisha declared she had to collect the little one from kindergarten. She said goodbye in her shy manner, the dark Turkic eyes smiling gently. I felt that two large dinners on one day was a heavy burden, but I was sorry to leave their house. A young couple almost out of a fairy-tale where they have lived happily ever after, I thought sentimentally in the warm aftermath of the toasts.

The Mayor and Suleiman were planning a contest for the next expedition, based on the amount of game each could bring in. They parted and the Mayor rejoined us. 'Ah,' he said expansively. 'You know we call Nurek the Bouquet of the Soviet Union, because we have forty-five

nationalities represented here. Two hundred cities and towns contributed in manpower, material, research and citizenry.'

He led us over to the three-storey department store and we wandered from floor to floor. Everybody knew him, of course, but there was no deference; he was just another citizen even as head of the town Executive. 'Theatre companies visit us,' he said amid the rows of silk and cotton dresses, the leather-goods department, the plastic toys, transistor radios and hair lacquer. 'Some of the best troupes of the Soviet Union. Of course, we have our own local companies.'

He introduced me to the director of the town trade organisation. There was a staff of 567 people engaged in the trading enterprises, he announced readily, but only 25 people were engaged in administration. This store now took in approximately one thousand rubles a day. One could imagine him as the town architect, with all the facts and figures clicking away in his mind: the five-year plan, the carefully worked out objectives.

I reinforced the economy of Nurek by buying a Tajik dress for Blanche.

The weather had cleared and the mountains had come into sight again. I met Oisha on the street for the last time, leading her toddling son, and she nodded and smiled shyly. After we had walked around the interior of the *Dom Kultury*, we headed for our car. It was 7.50 p.m. and still light, and the Mayor shook hands, beaming at us, holding his natty navy-blue hat and square-shouldered in his neat brown suit. Perhaps, as he waved us good-bye, he was thinking of next Sunday's quail-shooting.

Gentlemen of the Road

Back along the mountain road towards Dushanbe, through the green and khaki hills, the wet scenery leaned off on each side as we passed, with a gap now and then to expose a misty valley below, the river tumbling white over the boulders.

In another mountain canyon through which the Vakhsh rushed, work had begun on the Rogun hydropower sta-

tion, which would feed electricity to the developing Southern Tajikistan industrial centres. Although only 320 miles long, it has enormous power potential as it races down the steep mountain slopes. With five power stations planned, these will be used not only for new industries being set up in the region, like the Regar aluminium refinery and Yavan electrochemical combine, but will also feed the Soviet Central Asia power grid. The new Rogun station would also help irrigate 1,250 square miles of land through the Amu-Bukhara and Kara Kum canals.

The early evening was clear in the mountains, the sunlight still bathing the high region. We slowed down for sheep and cattle sleepily crossing the road; a cow peered solemnly at us and then gave way. Madonis was immediately inspired to expound further on the virtues of his own cow; Larissa wanted me to give an imitation of Tom Jones' *Delilah.*

There was a clearing with a water fountain on the roadside and we pulled up to wet our throats. A small truck was parked there, too, and a group of men in ordinary suits were grouped by the wall around the clearing, eating together from a big hunk of roast lamb and washing it down with shots of cognac, and munching strawberries from a paperbag. There were eight of them and their conversation quietened, watching us as we climbed out of the Volga.

We discovered that we had nothing from which to drink the fountain water, and we held our mouths under the stream trickling from the pipe jutting from the embankment. But one of the men called, 'Here, use this', gesturing with a glass. However, when we had passed the water around, they still weren't satisfied. They seemed to recognise a foreigner and immediately decided to make him welcome.

Now they were crowding around smiling, shaking hands, rattling off questions. Lumps of the best portion of the lamb, laid out on old copies of *Tajikskaya Pravda,* were pressed on me. A fresh half litre of cognac was conjured up, the glass (it appeared to be the only one in the company) was filled for me and toasts commenced again,

accompanied by strawberries and roast lamb, the glass being passed from man to man.

They were heads of building brigades on their way home from Dushanbe to Nurek for their weekly visit, hence the suits. 'We've built a tunnel through the mountains in the Yavan district to bring water to one of the isolated valleys', one of the men said, chewing lamb and insisting I have another shot of the cognac. It was very smooth, probably from Armenia or Georgia.

The eight men represented seven different nationalities and were proud of their 'unity in diversity'. But there was a quiet man with blue eyes and a badly scarred face who said nothing; just stood on the outskirts of our mingled groups. The others introduced themselves happily, munching and swigging the cognac, the bottle itself passing around now. Yuri Molkov, Boris Krasvanov, Valery Badiyan, Aslanov, Yeshbekov were the names I caught.

When they heard I was from South Africa and Larissa related some of my experiences, their enthusiasm mounted. 'We know about affairs in your country from the newspapers and the TV. We are with the African people in their struggle.'

'I am a Tatar,' a little man laughed. 'Let's drink to African people.'

'We want to drink together with all your people,' another said.

'Come and visit us,' I said. 'We produce some good brandy too.'

They were Tatar, Uzbek, Tajik, Azerbaijanian, Russian, Ukrainian and a German. 'There are no differences as far as we are concerned; our various peoples live together in equality and all work and enjoy life together. Each one gives according to his ability,' the Uzbek said. 'Have some more lamb.'

'They invite you to live here,' Larissa said. 'They say why live in England? Come and live in their country.'

Now the scar-faced man who had not spoken said: 'I drink to the time of your victory and when you are able to live again in your own country.' It turned out he had taken me for another tourist and so had shown no initial interest.

'I believe that all changes should come peacefully,' another of the group said. 'With the help of the words. We have seen too much bloodshed and we should avoid any more. Many of us have lost our parents, our close relations and friends during the war.' Later we had to say good-bye to the group, the scarfaced man shaking my hand warmly, blue eyes alight. They stood by their truck in their off-duty suits, waving to us, all just workers going home, willing to share with others, talk about peace and friendship.

Confectioners et cetera

The vestibule of the restaurant had been laid out with tables displaying a rainbow arrangement of icing sugar: little fairy cakes and tall towers and pyramids; pink, green, yellow-white paste moulded into a fantasy of the confectioner's craft; delicate traceries and Gothic curlicues, flowers and butterflies, formed leaf by leaf, petal by petal, fragile wings, all carved by the fine and steady hand of a skilled confectioner, wielding the cake decorator, piston and plunger, with the hand of an artist: perhaps, it was another art form, the art of cake decoration. Over all this young men and women in spotless white uniforms and chef's caps stood restless guard: the faintest jar might bring a palace toppling into sugary ruin.

This day the competition for confectioners up to the age of 25 years was being held, they were junior members of the trade, and their entries were being displayed.

Inside the restaurant we were given a table out of the way, because the main part was being prepared for the competition by the waiters and waitresses. The tables were being laid with spotless napery and gleaming cutlery, the crockery had to be set in their exact positions, the napkins folded with geometric accuracy: everything had to be just so.

Above the clink-clink of knives and forks a waitress complained petulantly to another: 'Tamara Vassilyevna, have you taken one of my plates?'

The waitresses were dressed in starched white and lace frills over black skirts, and over them hovered stout matrons in bouffant hairstyles. After a nervous breakfast of

ordinary eggs we left, tip-toeing across the floor lest a carelessly placed foot jarred a fork out of position. A flake of cigarette ash might cost a prize, a diploma, promotion. It was like a parade of the catering service; one imagined the commissions being pinned on after the dessert.

At the Academy of Sciences of the Republic we were welcomed by a mild-mannered man in a neat tropical suit. His plump olive face smiled gently and his hand, when I shook it, was polite. This was Comrade Rajabov, I was told, an academician, doctor of juridical sciences, professor, an honoured scientist of the Republic and laureate of the State Abu-Ali ibn-Sina Prize. Behind the formidable array of titles the Tajik face was smooth, soft and kind, but one wondered where to begin the conversation.

The Academy provided for about 3,000 people, but their work was really only a part of the whole, he said in his quiet voice. The olive hands toyed with a pen on the shiny desk. 'Science in Tajikistan is part of the entire Soviet scientific enterprise,' he said, 'but at the same time, we hold a definite place in that science.'

We spoke at length about the national question. The way it was resolved in the Soviet Union is one of the greatest achievements of socialism, and has immense international impact.

'We are aware of its importance for world public opinion,' Rajabov said. 'Many books and articles have been written on the subject, but they cannot cover all the experience we have acquired so far. We must go deep into the essence of the matter. By letting our friends know of our experience we are, in effect, performing our internationalist duty.'

'We still have some unsettled problems,' he added. 'The economic and cultural level of all nations and ethnic groups has still to be raised to the level of the most advanced. Then, there is the long-term objective of uniting all peoples of the Soviet Union into one whole. This ongoing convergence is an objective historical process.'

There were differences of cultural and economic levels, certainly. Some nationalities had commenced life in the Soviet community at relatively high levels, while others

had started with practically nothing. Now the task was to raise everything to the level of developed nations. 'That's the main thing: to get the same level throughout the Soviet Union,' said Rajabov. 'In practical terms, all people receive the same payment for the same job. Educationally, there is the same system throughout the USSR, and now we are reaching the stage of compulsory secondary education.'

The Tajik people had reached a certain level of culture when the USSR was formed. 'But let's take the Kirghiz people. They didn't have any written literature, but today they have outstanding writers, who are the pride of the whole Soviet Union. Then again, the Tajik people while knowing folk dancing, did not know what ballet was. Today their ballerinas are admired all over the world, as far as New York.'

There was also the question of the difference between town and countryside that had to be dealt with; the differences, too, between mental and physical labour. 'Our planning system tries to take all these things into consideration, including the demands of various nationalities. For example, there are some underdeveloped districts which receive special attention in order to help them catch up.'

Rajabov's eyes twinkled. 'In Tajikistan we envisage that the next five years will be a leap forward, but, certainly, it won't have anything to do with the kind of "great leap forward" of certain others. The industrial sector of agriculture, for instance, will be developed, and we hope to make Tajikistan a model industrial-agricultural republic.'

We chatted further and I could see this mild-mannered scientist working with many others, with the state-planners and the economists, sociologists, all working on the future of this ancient country where the mountaineers had fought the Macedonian phalanxes of Alexander, and the Mohammedan conquest had raised the green banner of Islam, and the Russian revolution had brought socialism.

In the lobby, where we shook hands once more, and he welcomed me to come again, there were glass cases

full of excavated relics of Tajikistan's past: petrified carving in wood from the 8th century. On the wall, a portrait of Lenin with the clipped beard, the shrewd and far-seeing eyes.

The sky had cleared and it was hot again. The textile factory clattered and roared and the weaving frames slapped and banged. We were met by a Mohamed Kasimov, the only male among the delegation of women in the bright Tajik dresses. I shook hands around, recalling names, like Karganova, Gribanova, Lydia, Tamara. Around us, as they took me through the factory, the shuttles and spindles clacked and whirred and dark Tajik and blue Russian eyes seemed to smile mischievously at me. The majority of workers were women, because this was a textile factory.

'You see I am alone among the women,' Mohamed said smiling, when we were in a quieter sector.

'Like one thorn among roses,' I said and they all laughed. Soviet people seem eager to laugh.

Most factories are run on similar lines. This one was the biggest textile enterprise in Dushanbe and they worked forty-one hours a week in shifts of eight hours a day and two days off. That meant the factory was operating all the time, closing only on public holidays. Everybody had 21 days' holiday, and paid sick leave pending on doctor's orders; he could prescribe days off, a sanatorium, rest-homes. Maternity leave was 56 days before the event and 56 days after, on full pay. There is a nursery school and kindergarten under the trees near the factory, where mothers leave their toddlers, collecting them when the shift ends. If they are on a different shift the husbands or older children fetch the youngsters. This factory also has its own Pioneer camp where the workers' children go for the summer holidays. 'Some shifts I start at 7 a.m.,' one of the women explained. 'My youngest child goes to the kindergarten here and the two older ones to the local school. My hubby brings the little one to the kindergarten when I'm on another shift and the other boy or girl collects him.'

'What provision is there for relaxation among the workers?' I asked.

'Well,' one of the women said, 'there is a rest-home outside Dushanbe and we can go there over the weekends or for longer holidays. Then there are cultural competitions among workers–we have a very good factory choir.'

The average wage of a weaver was 200 rubles a month. Wages are calculated on a monthly basis, but paid in two parts: twice a month, the first part being less than the balance.

Were there problems relating to wages? How did the workers resolve this with the directorship? Each worker had a pay book in which his earnings were recorded, so if he had complaints or felt he was being underpaid, he took the book and his complaints to the head of his or her brigade who looked into the matter. If the complaints were justified, the necessary adjustments were made, but the wage assessments were usually very accurately worked out in the trade unions.

All production plans were discussed from the bottom up. The workers in the union branches at the factory discussed the targets for the factory, made suggestions and criticisms aimed at successfully fulfilling the quotas. These went up to the other levels, the Party committee and the directorship.

'What's the relationship between the trade union and the Communist Party in this factory?' I asked.

'The union and the Party work closely together,' one of the women said. 'Of course, many of the trade unionists are also Party members, but in general the leadership and encouragement comes from the Party.'

'This one is one of our heroes of labour,' Mohamed said, smiling as he gestured towards one of the women. 'We are all very proud of her, of course.'

We were sitting at a table in one of the administrative sections and some of the workers were bringing in plates of salad and glasses of tea from the canteen. Somewhere beyond us the factory clattered and banged. 'What's it like to feel like a hero of labour?' I asked. She was in her thirties, a handsome woman with the usual dark hair.

She blushed modestly under her dark skin. 'If I received the award for the high level of productivity it is only

because I represent my whole work group. I consider it a collective prize; after all we all pitched in.'

The walls of the room we were in were hung with the samples of material produced by the factory, murals out of woven cotton in both Tajik and foreign design making the surroundings riotous with colour.

She had come to this factory as an orphan, a very young girl, and she had worked there for twenty-three years. Now she was a mother of four children. Her husband worked elsewhere, and they made the usual arrangements about delivering the younger children to and from school.

She was also a member of the Supreme Soviet of the USSR, I learned. An orphan who worked in a factory and helped run that vast country. 'Does the factory continue to pay your wages while you attend sessions of the Supreme Soviet?'

'Yes,' she said. 'There are no professional members of parliament. We get our usual pay from the factory plus expenses, for travelling, and so on.'

The director of the factory was away elsewhere, but I learned that he had started as a worker, graduated from a technical institute by correspondence courses and had been promoted according to his qualifications. He had degrees in technical sciences, and his experiences had also been taken into consideration. 'Being a director is not a privilege,' they said.

Now they wanted to know about workers in South Africa. I had to explain about racial divisions, Whites' privilege, job reservation, the inferior economic, social and political status of Blacks, the racist theory of Whites' supremacy, while they listened, looking extremely puzzled, almost uncomprehending. They had never experienced such a state of affairs.

'What's an overseer?' one of the women asked, her face bewildered.

When I had to leave they presented me with a length of material from the factory for my wife.

At the hotel restaurant the confectionery and catering contest was over. The waitresses had returned to the afternoon bustle of clearing away, but the judges still sat at a long table under a red-lettered banner, as if they ex-

pected further courses. They waved me to join them and tut-tutted, because I had not witnessed the passing-out. However, somebody insisted I sample some portions of the prize courses. A loudspeaker blared celebratory music and the carefully set tables of that morning had been reduced to happy chaos. I never did find out who had been the prize winners, but a young confectioner presented Larissa and me with a little *pirozhnoye* each, sweet, gaily decorated tea-cakes: perhaps, she had been one of them.

Star Gazers and Cotton-Raisers

Birds chirped among the trees and the sun shone hotly out of the clear sky. The rain had gone and the weather sweltered over the city enclosed by the ramparts of the mountains. Above the greenery silvery domes poked like futuristic craft, glittering in the sun. One thought of H. G. Wells' *The War of the Worlds*–the Martians had landed. But they were the domes that enclosed the telescopes of the Institute of the Earth–Dushanbe's observatory, all pointing towards the place where an extra-terrestrial invasion would come, if any.

The director who spoke English and who was engaged, I think, in investigating the chemical composition of the sky, showed us around. I had never been inside an observatory and this one possessed, beside the giant telescopes in the metal domes, a bewildering array of television and other scanning equipment. 'They have the same equipment in Canada,' the director said with a trace of pride. He introduced me to another member of the staff who was working on the history of Tajik astronomy–they had a long association with the subject, dating back to before the Persians. I remember that Omar Khayyam came into the conversation somewhere: *'And that inverted Bowl we call the Sky, whereunder crawling coop'd we live and die. . . .'*

I was lost in explanations of radio waves in the ionosphere, the workings of radio photography, the recent innovations of television scanning of the sky. They had already looked at the Moon with their TV apparatus, and were now getting ready to sit back and view mysteries of

Jupiter, Venus, Mars. I had a vague memory of the map of the sky in the back of my high-school textbook aeons ago: I had flunked science. But I was undeterred; had I not read Azimov and Wyndham and delved in the works of Ray Bradbury? You could pick up a lot of tit-bits if you knew your sci-fi.

A good-looking young blonde in an appealing shirt and slacks brought relief. She pulled the lever that slowly trundled open a great dome overhead, but it was daylight and the sun poured in. I learned with some dejection that she was not just a puller of levers that released wheels that opened domes to reveal the sky at night. The romance of stars and moonlight passed above her pretty blonde head: it was she who had actually one night in 1969 discovered a new comet and actually had it named after her. She was thirty and the shirt and slacks gave her the air of some glamour film starlet playing alongside Dr. Quatermass, or Doc Savage instead of being a dyed-in-the-wool, real live astronomer with many genuine letters after her name.

Besides exploring the sky at night and admitting troupes of schoolchildren to be introduced to the mysteries of Sirius or the Milky Way, the observatory also exchanged personnel with foreign countries, like the FRG, Belgium, Somalia. A team of Tajikistan astronomers had spent two years in Mogadishu. But what was more interesting, perhaps, was that they undertook trips into their own countryside, portable and mobile equipment and all, to collective farms in order to show and explain to the peasantry the realities of the Universe, dispelling false beliefs and superstition, replacing these with a Marxist view of nature.

It was warmer still out in the Leninsky district in Speshak Region where the collective farm lay. Streets were lined with cottages mounted with TV aerials and surrounded by fences. Some of the streets were being repaired, young boys and girls raised dust with their bicycles. In the main square outside the farm headquarters the portrait of Lenin was flanked by the targets for the current five-year plan and slogans urging on the farmers.

It was a long walk in the sun, exploring the farm vil-

lage, shaking hands with locals in turbans or *tyubeteikas*, being stared at by wide-eyed dark and blonde children. One can write about Soviet collective and state farms as a particular subject, but each one has its own pride, its prowess in the scheme of production, each one likes itself to be known separately.

Our host was chatty, guiding us around, ushering me to meet Comrade This and Comrade That, visiting the cottages with their television sets and Oriental carpeting. At one of the houses we sat on quilts on the back veranda and tore off hunks from the round loaves, drank a local brew, ate cherries, exchanged stories. The birds whistled in the trees.

The farm had been organised in 1932 and 1933 out of a neglected community of eighty families living in this valley, which had been practically a desert.

Small credits had been granted by the state to get things going and they had grown gradually. Some well-off families in the valley decided to join. They planted only wheat–cotton was unknown.

Now they produced more than 4,000 tons of cotton a year, together with corn, maize and wheat for the cattle fodder. They owned thousands of head of sheep and cattle, hundreds of horses. Farm produce was sold to the state trade organisations, according to agreements drawn up: tons of wheat, milk, beet, thousands of eggs. The average wage was 120 rubles a month, but engineers, mechanics and highly skilled workers earned more, sometimes 200 rubles. There were bonuses too. With bonuses a farm worker could make 300 rubles. In addition, each family was granted a portion of land for their own production. One usually saw their stalls at the Dushanbe market along with the state sellers.

Now the population was 15,000, of whom 4,200 were schoolchildren.

'We have many children,' our host announced passing the bowl of cherries. 'My wife is a Hero Mother.'* He

* Mothers of ten and more children are given the title Hero Mother and awarded the Hero Mother Order by decree of the USSR Supreme Soviet.–*Ed.*

cried amid laughter: 'For me to be a hero father I must produce twenty-five children!'

There were twelve schools in the village and a hospital of 105 beds, plus a maternity wing, I learned, as I ploughed through bread, meat, cherries. The doctors and teachers were paid by the state and not by the collective farm; in education there was no difference between town and country, except, perhaps, many who intended to remain farmers concentrated on agronomy or learned mechanical engineering.

The wages of the farmers were decided at a meeting of the entire collective, according to the farm charter. From 60 to 70 per cent of farm income went into wages; there was a fund for the purchase of machinery like tractors and combines, an allocation for pensioners and for those who had lost family members in the Great Patriotic War; and for assistance to war veterans.

People made donations to such organisations as the Red Cross, the solidarity committee or peace organisations. Often they would vote to donate a whole day's wages to such bodies. Children collected scrap metal for the same purposes.

The women in the kitchen were passing along more food and the party did justice to the proffering, while I battled to keep up.

There was a Society of Knowledge where people went to hear lectures given by scientists and teachers from the city: international affairs, Soviet politics, aesthetics, philosophy.

Outside everybody had to pose for a photograph.

I was introduced to more people: Yusuf Rajabov, Khatilov, Muralov and a host of other villagers. The problem was that everybody wanted you to come inside to eat and drink. I wondered whether there were awards for those who could devour the most. At last I managed to reach School No. 7, panting with exhaustion and relief, behind our host. (At least one did not expect the teachers to produce piles of edibles.) He was 58 years old and a war veteran; he had a brother aged 77 who was head of a cotton-producing brigade and had won an award; they were very proud of their schools–this one was only an example. 'Our

children must be educated,' he cried indefatigably. 'Study, study and study, as Lenin said.'

I was still trying to recall the quotation when, to my horror, he announced lunch at the village restaurant.

Outside in the dusty streets the women moved about like flowers being carried on a wind, in their brilliant wide-sleeved frocks called *atlaskhons*, the hems and collars of many beautifully embroidered. It was the age-old art of silk and golden thread *zarduzi* (embroidery), handed down from generation to generation. Nowadays it was, probably, part of the dressmaking industry.

When the collective farm representatives finally regaled me, well fed and drowsy, in the quilted traditional robe and tied the big kerchief about my engorged middle, planted the embroidered *tyubeteika* on my head and announced me honorary member of the village, I felt that, perhaps, I had finally arrived.

3. The Big Sky

The horses turned in a wide circle raising a wake of yellow-brown dust out of the grass as they moved, travelling fast. They were a sizeable herd, mostly mares and colts, the colts looking gawky with their over-long legs, but running hard with the rest. The hooves thudded on the surface of the country, running in the flat afternoon sun that lay on the prairie that seemed to crawl with shadowy patches as the clouds moved across the sky. The herd passed, spreading out at first start and then huddling together again as if for protection.

We had startled them long before we came up, it seemed, and they could be away long before we got there, galloping across the shallow dips in the otherwise flat steppeland. We had passed a herd earlier and they had started off at a run parallel to our car bumping along a track, heading towards the horizon, strung out in a leg-stretching scamper of hooves. We had watched them heading dustily towards the horizon to the east, the dust hanging like thin smoke against the sky and then dwindling in the sunlight.

From the distance I was reminded of a herd of kudu or eland drumming across the African *veld*, the sharp hooves churning the tough *kikuyu* grass; or a bunch of kongoni or antelope with horns like sabres. But we were far north in the Kazakh Soviet Socialist Republic and the sky was not as harsh and blazing as that of Africa.

After that we had passed on, bumping along the old track.

Now we were out of the car and watching this other herd, the mares and colts, galloping bunched across the coarse-grassed steppeland. All around us the flat, slightly undulating grasslands stretched away far, far, blank and featureless except for clumps of yellow flowers and scattered salt-pans, to the horizon. These were the great plains of Kazakhstan, brown in the distance, but really green

underfoot; the great prairies of the second biggest republic of the Soviet Union; endless to the eyes, as if the grasslands stretched to the edge of the world under an equally endless sky.

The herd swerved, the lead horse turning in a big curve to take the rest in another direction as we saw the horseman galloping on their flank, whistling shrilly at the running horses. He manoeuvred them expertly, riding crouched but easily in his saddle, turning the herd to bunch them again, his mount responding smoothly to boot and hand. He had the herd slowed down and galloped offside of the dust, so he could see them all while we leaned against the car and watched.

He was a Kazakh herdsman and rode with the Centaurian combination of man and horse; the kind of horseman that had held the envy of the footgoer from ancient times. He was the Kazakh equivalent of the Mexican *charro* rider, the North American wrangler, the *gaucho* of the pampas, the Chilean *huaso*. Riding hard to cut out one of the colts, a long-legged roan, you could feel the colt sensing danger, crowding close to the mother in the pounding press of the rest of the herd, and see the mare's eyes rolling as she, too, tried to look back on the herdsman closing in. He was among the herd now, splitting off a bunch, galloping just behind the roan colt and the mare, riding with one hand on the reins, the *kuruk* held poised in the other, the long pole with a rope looped at the end and the length to tighten the noose held with the pole, holding it couched like a lance, waiting for the chance to thrust out and get the loop over the colt's head. He looks like bloody Don Quixote, I thought.

The mare dodged like a ballplayer on the side of the bunch as the pole jabbed forward, the colt following instinctively and the herdsman missed with the loop. The rest of the herd circled and passed, but the herdsman kneed his mount expertly, trapping the colt, cutting it off from the mare and the looped pole came down over the over-large hammer-head of the colt, jerking tight on the neck. The herdsman rode with the colt straining at the *kuruk* for some yards, and the mare looking almost humanly anxious. The colt skidded to a stop and looked

worried struggling against the noose and finally quietened, shivering.

The rest of the herd galloped for some time across the steppeland until two more horsemen appeared whooping them into a turn and they were all slowing to a canter, stopping finally to circle, huddled fretfully on a slight slope in the land, the herdsmen standing over them, their *kuruks* held like lances at rest.

The colt's dam was trotting worriedly back and forth on the edge of the herd and the drover was looking the colt over.

So we all went over to stroke and pacify the trembling colt: he had huge scared eyes and a coarse thick coat of light reddish-brown, tough and hard under the hand. Larissa practically kissed him and he stood there on his very long legs, trembling. Afterwards satisfied about something the herdsman eased the noose, lifting it over the clumsily-looking hammer-head, and the colt dashed off towards its mother and the rest of the grazing herd.

'He looked so beautiful to pet,' she said.

'You should come and live up here then,' I said. 'Give up the Moscow University.'

The herdsman sat his horse, smiling down at us from under a flat cap, his jaw lean and unshaven, eyes narrowed from riding too long in the sun. I patted the twitching neck of his mount.

'His name's Eagle,' he said. 'I am Balatkan Shamiganov.' He leaned down to shake hands, his was hard and horny, as we were introduced all round. The other two herdsmen cantered up and introduced themselves too: Alexei Vladimirov, Alibai Kasimov.

Overhead a hawk sailed slowly across the expanse of the sky, where only some clouds moved, making shadows on the steppeland like shadows of whales on the bed of the sea.

The Kazakhs are great riders and national traditions go back many thousand years; the ancient and original culture of the Kazakhs was formed under conditions of nomadic life which left its deep imprint on the art and life of present-day Kazakhs.

Festivals among the Kazakhs are usually accompanied

by national sports, inevitably involving horses. There is the *alaman-baiga*–mass horse-racing and the *kokpar* in which teams of horsemen struggle to take possession of a carcass or a dummy goat, passing it one to the other as they ride headlong for the goal. Among the teenagers a popular game is *Kyskuu*, meaning something like 'catch the girl', wherein a girl and a boy race each other on horseback and if the girl overtakes the boy, she strikes him with a lash, but if the boy wins–well, he gets a kiss. Yes, the Kazakhs are great horse riders. *I* have never been on a horse in my life.

A Welcome to the Prairies

Later we left the riders with their herd of horses, driving back the way we had come across the vast steppeland, following the old trail that made a yellow and brown rutted scar across the apparently everlasting range. Home on the range. Those herdsmen, tending horses and sheep, worked the usual eight-hour shift of all workers, but usually they arranged it so they stayed out twenty-four hours or even two days at a time, which gave them extra days off to rest up at one of the lake resorts.

Hours later we got back to this herder's station we had started from earlier. It was part of the big state farm and there were stations scattered all over in this outback country. This station consisted of about forty families, horse herders and shepherds, who lived in neatly arranged cottages lined up into streets: beyond the last houses, the grassland closed in as if they lived cut off from the rest of the world.

But there were big black Volga cars parked in front of some of the cottages. The houses had radios, electricity, gas, TV. Some of the off-duty herdsmen were coming out to the big cars, wearing natty suits, the women in their best, to drive down to the lakes for a few days' relaxation.

Down one of the streets was the primary school and club-house, where the visiting concert troupes came and there was the *kino*-theatre, the central office connected with the main estate of the state farm, of which these forty families formed one-tenth. It was like the Wild West gone

socialist; there was no town marshal or sheriff, only the red flag hanging over the office door.

Of course, you couldn't just leave. The others and I were ushered into the living-room of the cottage. The dining table was spread with bottles of champagne, plates of snacks and bowls.

'They want to do something about your arrival,' my guide in Kazakhstan Amangeldeh said. 'I don't think writers have penetrated this far into Kazakhstan. So you are quite a novelty.'

I was introduced to Shoken Sbasov, who lived here and had been working on this territory ten years before the settlement was started. That earned him the Red Banner of Labour, I think. There was an old man with a wooden leg and some men wearing medals and orders on their jackets. They pointed out the war medals, the labour awards, the Order of the Red Banner of Labour.

The champagne corks popped and glasses were filled. The usual toasts commenced, the food was passed around. 'We used to welcome guests with bread and salt,' one of the men said, 'but we'll forget that now and welcome you this way instead. Bottoms up.'

Bowls were filled from leather bags of *kumiss,* fermented mare's milk, and snacks of cottage cheese rolled into balls and dried in the sun, and little slices of dried horse meat which is a delicacy with Kazakhs.

'I must take some of the horse meat back with me,' I said. 'It is like South African *biltong.*' But they wouldn't let me take the little slices; instead one of the women disappeared into the kitchen and brought back a big slab of the jerked meat. It still hangs in our backyard at home: somehow nobody could bring himself to finish it off.

There was an old grandmother sitting next to the TV set and singing about her long-departed son who had come home at last. It sounded very sad in the Kazakh language, and somebody announced that I had been adopted into the family. Everybody was very sentimental at this stage, as the subjects of the toasts revealed.

This being a small settlement one was expected to visit other families as well. I thought lugubriously of the legions of dinners that paraded ahead of me throughout

my trip through the Soviet Union. Hospitality in the USSR is not only overwhelming, it is a national pastime.

The horse meat tit-bits and thick slices of bread and sausage disappeared and the left-overs joined the empty champagne and vodka bottles. The party started to break up. I clutched my hunk of horse meat wrapped in newspaper. We had to proceed to the next cottage.

Outside I was somewhat taken aback to find a pair of what the British might describe as 'dolly birds' waiting to meet me, complete with the latest in mini-skirts and the best of make-up and hairstyles. Bright as butterflies against a background of picket fences, the waddling ducks, the old man with the wooden leg, they looked incongruously at home.

It turned out they were the daughters of shepherds who were attending the University in Alma Ata and had flown up to visit their parents. There they were dolled up in the height of fashion and had not forgotten the old folks at home up here, far on the desolate prairies. What they wanted from me was information about the youth in South Africa, what the Young Communists there were doing, what was life like in my country.

I did my best; it was a matter of having to cut a long story short. Afterwards they wanted my autograph, signed on postcards which they produced. They said *spasibo* (thank you) with bright smiles and made off chattering, towards one of the cottages.

The next cottage was that of Comrade Kaliev. Another welcome table awaited us, but this did not cause the company any problems.

The City of Apples

Whether you are a lover of nature or one who prefers hard asphalt under his feet, Alma Ata is a city that will give you a choice of each. It's thousands of apple trees that gave it its name, which means 'Father of apples'. It is a garden city whose long avenues are lined with the greenery of poplar, elm and white acacia: it is a city for springtime. Neatly balanced at the foot of a high mountain ridge of the Zailiisky Alatau range that rambles into the

Tien Shan, its geometrical streets are held straight by the gurgling irrigation ditches and flanked in several places by parks and interrupted by squares.

Kazakh architects try to give a national character to the cities of the Republic, introducing elements of Kazakh ornamentation in murals and carvings on the façades of many of the larger buildings. Above the tops of trees rise coloured mosaic walls and stained glass jig-sawed into illustrations from Kazakh folklore.

And beyond all this the population of 850,000 see the ragged battlements of the Alatau mountains all the time, black-grey and somehow foreboding, the peaks like bared white fangs to remind one of conquered yet untamed nature. They had built a great barrier up in the mountains, above where the great Stadium at Medeo now stands, to curb the melting snows which in the past had sent avalanches of mud with its spring thaws smashing down to flick like a giant finger everything from its path: crumbs brushed from earth's tablecloth by some fussy giant. But all is safe now, the grumbling Frost giant has been penned, to give way to ice-skaters, hockey players, future Olympic champions.

In the early winter the surrounding countryside can be beautiful, too, under its mantle of light snow. I once heard, on a previous visit, my wife wax superbly poetic by equating the silvery-decked land with a young bride draped in her wedding gown.

Having visited Alma Ata before, there were numerous old friends: Olzhas Suleimenov, one of the Kazakhstan's talented and popular young poets, who looks as if he belonged on the films; Anuar Alimjanov of the hawk face, the straight black hair and somewhat slanting eyes, the high cheekbones, the real Kazakh features, who wrote and was secretary of the Writers Union of the Republic. He was always smiling, as if he found happiness everywhere, always ready with some Kazakh proverb.

The Kazakhs have a large fount of proverbs, highly expressive, for almost every occasion: they can scorn cowardice and disparage conceit, solidify friendship and glorify people. One wondered whether, as in the Bible, there had not been compiled a book of proverbs *à la*

Kazakhstan. Or perhaps, Abai Kunanbayev did, scattered among his poems: *'Judge authors by words, not the reverse....'*

I met the young man who was to show me Kazakhstan: Murat Auezov, a soft-spoken and modest young man, who is the son of the late writer and Academician Mukhtar Auezov, known for his studies in Kazakh and Kirghiz folklore and author of the four-volume epic novel *Abai*, which is said to cover everything there is to know about the Kazakh people. Perhaps, the fame of his father accounted for the cheerfulness, kindness and modesty of the son: he was like that all the days we roamed Kazakhstan.

I waited at a table in the hotel lobby, while he checked me in. The hotel porter, an old pensioner, probably, smiled and gestured that I make myself comfortable while I waited. I tried to indicate that I was an old hand, Alma Ata was not really new to me. Outside the usual trolleybuses trundled past, at the doorway a shoe-repairer cobbled in a little kiosk, the driver of a tourist coach read a magazine at the wheel.

Somewhere beyond the blocks of flats lay the sophisticated machine-tool and steel-rolling factories, the plants that produced hydroengineering equipment and agricultural machinery, the food-processing enterprises. Scattered through the city are 12 higher and 16 secondary specialised educational institutes with their 95,000 students; the Kazakh State University, the theatres and conservatoire, the philharmonic society, cinemas, palaces of culture, libraries.

The hotel restaurant was down some passages on the first floor; you had to get to know your way. At breakfast there were parties eating big bowls of soup, piles of pastries. There were old peasants from the country, bearded oldsters in *tyubeteikas* and women in headscarves and long dresses, and men who looked like executives. The waitresses were very polite and friendly.

We drove to the revolutionary monument in the centre. A squad of high-school students in blue uniforms were on traffic duty and one of these youths directed the traffic with easy expertise, even halting a taxi and stalking professionally over to give the driver some advice on traffic

rules. He waved us ahead and our own driver edged carefully into a legal parking space.

It looked like youth day: at the memorial for those killed in the Revolution young boys and girls with rifles stood at rigid attention, guarding the memory of heroic dead: the Eternal Flame and a tall fluted column on a square base surrounded by flagstoned walks and trees. We watched while the guard was being changed, the relief approaching from what looked like a guard-post across the street, pacing in the rigid slow march, two boys and two girls. The girls looked a little incongruous in their pigtails and white knee-high socks: the rifles looked real enough. The grown-ups around the monument looked on respectfully. The change took place with the precision of clockwork: the sentry posts were handed over in a series of expert manoeuvres like a magician's sleight-of-hand: first you see and then you don't. Replaced by others, the relieved sentries marched off in the precise slow march until they reached the street. By the Eternal Flame the bouquets and red ribbons lay fading in the afternoon, where the donors, delegations and bridal couples had laid them. Only the memory did not fade: the Kazakh revolution burned on, the flame causing the air above it to quiver in its fervent heat.

Stone Age to Socialism

The settlement of what is now the Kazakh Soviet Socialist Republic began in the early Stone Age. By the middle of the 1st millennium B.C., the saki tribes on the territory were taking up the nomadic life of cattle-breeding, which came to be a determining factor in Kazakhstan's socio-economic development for thousands of years. In the 3rd and 2nd centuries B.C., various tribes began uniting to lay the basis of the indigenous population. In the 4th century A.D., feudal relations took shape and lasted right up to the October Revolution.

These feudal relations made slower headway on the great plains, in the steppelands of the centre, north and east, where the nomadic tribes roamed and lived.

What was known as 'the great silk road' of old times–linking Byzantium with China–crossed the south of Kazakhstan, as well as the caravan trails to South-Western Siberia. These gave rise to settlements and cities.

In the 13th century, came the Golden Horde–the Mongolian invasion. Cities and settlements were put to fire and sword, as the horsetail standards of the Mongols swept through on their way into Central Asia. Hundreds of thousands fell beneath the scimitars and arrows of the invaders, arresting the cultural and economic development of the area for two centuries.

It was not until the 15th century that the Kazakh nationality took shape on the ethnic basis of the ancient tribes. Racially they were of the same South Siberian Mongoloid stock, speaking mutually intelligible Turkic dialects and engaging in the same nomadic cattle-raising economy.

Other invasions took place. The Jungarian feudal lords from the East swept into the separate Kazakh Khanates during the 15th and 16th centuries. Under these conditions Russia was the only country which could save Kazakhstan from extermination. In 1731, the Junior Association, one of the three Kazakh population's divisions, voluntarily joined Russia. In 1740, the Middle and a few clans of the Senior joined, the rest falling under the overlordship of the Jungars and afterwards the feudal lords of Khiva and Kokand.

In the second half of the 18th century, Kazakhstan's economy was closely connected with that of tsarist Russia; and in spite of the latter's colonial policies there was an historically progressive situation since these great areas were delivered from enslavement by backward feudalist states.

The entry of great numbers of immigrants from Russia after serfdom was abolished in 1861 brought encouragement for Kazakhs to settle and work the land in the manner of these immigrants.

Industrial development accelerated the formation of the Kazakh proletariat, many Kazakhs being employed in coal and gold mines, in oilfields and other industries. Contact with Russian workers promoted class-consciousness among the locals, Marxist literature made its way in, and

at the beginning of the present century the first Social-Democratic groups sprang up on the initiative of exiled Russian revolutionaries. The revolutionary movement in Russia, 1905-1907, had its effect on the Kazakhs, the struggle developed against capitalism, the tsar and monarchy, against the local feudal lords.

Following the victory of the Petrograd workers and soldiers, the people of Kazakhstan rose to fight for the power of the Soviets.

The revolution in Kazakhstan was part of the process that swept the whole of Russia, but was marked by specific features arising from the socio-economic and cultural backwardness of the country, the small size of the industrial working class and the entrenched patriarchal-feudal relations in the vast countryside.

The counter-revolution, supported by the foreign interventionists, the Cossack elite and self-styled *alash-orda* government of the Kazakh bourgeois nationalists, opposed the power of workers and peasants. Red Guard detachments arrived from Petrograd and Moscow, the Urals and Volga area, to back up the Kazakh revolution. By March 1918, Soviet power was established throughout Kazakhstan.

But it wasn't over. The White Guards overran Kazakhstan and the Civil War ensued. Red Army units of Kazakhs, Russians, Uzbeks and other peoples fought side by side, and in 1920, the newly formed Red Army and the local people finally routed the White Guards.

In December 1922, Kazakhstan, as part of the Russian Federation, voluntarily united with the other sovereign Soviet republics to form the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics. In 1936, it became a Union Republic.

Jambul

When you visit Alma Ata, you will inevitably visit Jambul. West of the capital, it huddles up against the northern border of neighbouring Kirghizia. On the ancient caravan route that led from the Southern Kazakh region to the Aral Sea, the Altai and South-West Siberia trade cities, caravanserais and settlements sprang up,

especially in the Syr Darya River basin. One of the important centres of those times was Taraz, now named after Jambul Jabayev.

As Mukhtar Auezov was a historian and novelist, Jambul was the bard of Kazakhstan, composing passionate songs to the music of his *dombra,* the two-stringed folk instrument, he earned the title of *akyn,* folk poet and singer. It is estimated that his poetic message to besieged Leningrad in 1942, *Leningraders, Dear Children of Mine!,* is among the best works of Soviet writing.

So, all visitors are taken to the Jambul Museum where his lifetime is laid out in pictures, paintings, his personal possessions, gifts made to him. He had died in 1945, at the age of ninety-nine, and the curator of the museum, guiding you from room to room, will tell you with pride that 350 people came from Moscow to pay their last respects to this Kazakh national bard.

From the museum we went to drink *ayran** in the model *yurt,* the collapsible dwelling of the old-time nomads. A trellis-work frame of six sections forming a dome-like tent covered with felt and lined with carpets. It was taken apart and packed on camels or horses when the travellers were ready to move on. In fact, there *was* a camel outside under the trees, decorated with tasselled harness and carrying a pack-saddle. A group of children were trying to get it to move, but it refused to budge, sneering stubbornly with its upper lip at everybody. Perhaps, it was a permanent fixture, part of the historical museum, like the *yurt,* and had grown to realise this, hence its refusal to budge.

After that, we were off to the usual feast at the Jambul Collective Farm. The laws of hospitality in Kazakhstan, indeed in all of the USSR, have been meticulously preserved, even though many old customs have disappeared: bride abduction, payment of ransom money for a bride, the *levir*–compulsory marriage of a widow to the elder brother-in-law, these are all gone. But all over hospitality must be respected and it is bad manners to refuse to share a meal or even some *chai* (tea).

* Fermented milk.–*Ed.*

'We are doubly glad that you have come to our farm,' the farm chairman said with initial formality.

There was sturgeon and all kinds of *zakuski.* Soviet meals are misleading: one mistakes the piles of *hors d'œuvres* for the main meal, and discovers sometimes too late that the real eating session comes afterwards.

It is then, when in Kazakhstan, you are confronted with the traditional sheep's head.

I gazed with some trepidation as the head, shaved and boiled, was carried in on a platter. The glazed eyes stared at me as if they accused me of its demise; the teeth sneered sardonically. One thought of Salome, the dance of the seven veils, the fate of John the Baptist.

It is necessary for the guest of honour to do the carving. I looked hesitantly about; all this was new to me–I had never been initiated–until Larissa translated the rules of the ceremony.

The ears went, one each, to those who sat on each side of me; the cheeks, muzzle, various other parts had to be served according to traditional protocol; the hostess had to get her special share, until at last the remains of the skull was passed to the eldest at the table, who was head of the local trade union, Bizhen by name, and who was a veteran of the Great Patriotic War and had served for a time as political commissar with those Kazakh troops who spoke no Russian. He reduced the remains of the sheep's head further, finally sharing out the brains. He had white hair and a sort of Pancho Villa moustache.

The Jambul Collective Farm had been formed like all the others all over the Soviet Union. The kulaks* there were expropriated around 1928 to 1930 when the collectivisation commenced.

The figures, norms, quotas were trotted out with the toasts, the variety of glasses. Hunks of mutton were chomped greasily. Everything edible on the table and at the other homes was produced on the farm, the rest went to the food-processing plants and factories, according to

* Kulaks–name for the rural bourgeoisie, a numerous stratum comprising 12.3 per cent of the population in tsarist Russia in 1913. Alongside the capitalists and big landowners, the kulaks were rabid and irreconcilable enemies of the workers' revolution.–*Ed.*

official agreements; if the agreements were broken on either side, fines would be paid.

The sheep's head disintegrated into its component bones; there was more meat stewed with potatoes; duck, tea with milk and cream. Kazakhstan was the only part of the Soviet Union where I discovered milk or cream in tea: everywhere else people drank black or green tea straight.

The chairman of the farm was raising his glass of cognac and asking: 'Will you take an order?' He had a crew-cut and was Comrade Marzhakhmed.

'Well, not knowing what it will be, I'll risk saying yes,' I said.

He said, twinkling: 'Good. You are our friend and you know Jambul lived to be nigh on one hundred years. We order you to live to a hundred too.'

Everybody clapped and I said: 'All right, I'll do my best.'

The eating and drinking was accompanied with the music on the *dombra à la* Jambul, played by one of my hosts. After a while, somebody announced a fifteen-minute interval and we wandered about the gardens outside. Birds shrilled in the trees, spring hung in the May air. I got to know my hosts a little better over the cigarettes, the favourite *Kazakhstanskiye,* exchanging chit-chat that differed from the toasts and the jokes and anecdotes over the table.

Later there was more eating and toasts, this time to the woman, with the hostess and others present. By this time I was brave enough to serenade them with an old song, *Maytime.* It sounded a little strange with simultaneous translation being recited in the background.

It was little different at the Michurin Farm: the same hospitality, the dignitaries to encourage the feasting after the tour.

I was invited there for May 22. Still recovering from Jambul's feasting, I was haunted all night by the heads of sheep which sneered accusingly at me.

Along the boulevard outside, Kazakh and other girls in a parade of micro-mini-skirts and traditional frocks, boys in suede jackets and denim jeans were lugging their

briefcases to college. Men in loose shirts and *tyubeteikas* mingled with them. At the hotel entrance the cobbler was in his little kiosk ready to repair or shine your shoes. It was not my shoes that needed repairing.

We set out for the Michurin Farm. There were a man who was First Secretary of the District Committee of the Communist Party, the chairman of the farm, the secretary of the farm Party committee waiting to welcome us.

The Michurin Farm had started in 1929 with 120 families, now there were more than one thousand, making up a population of 6,500. The main products were fruit, vegetables and milk; there were a Russian and Kazakh secondary schools, three kindergartens, two polyclinics. The population consisted of 27 nationalities, including Russians, Byelorussians, Greeks, Czechs, Germans, among the local Kazakhs. They all lived in cottages surrounded by gardens and trees.

'Tsygane' [Gypsies]

We went for a walk in the public market in Alma Ata, while the weather was still holding out. Collective farmers and market-gardeners sold their wares under long covered stalls. It wasn't like an Oriental market place at all. Although there were old men in robes, turbans or *tyubeteikas,* and women in shawls and headscarves, all the prices seemed fixed, so there wasn't all the haggling and bartering as seen in old-time films of Asia. There were tons of produce, fruit and vegetables, cherries, spices, and, of course, cucumbers. I thought about all the Western reports of crop failures and how the Soviet Union would be in for a bad time this year or next, or, probably, the year after, but there was no sign of a shortage of food. Maybe there would be a bad crop, or the frost would damage, but there was no sign of anybody suffering. Tomatoes were lacking, because the USSR isn't a good place to raise tomatoes. And some of the food has to be imported, which means queueing. Feeding over two hundred and sixty million people scattered from Franz Josef Land in the Arctic to Kushka in Turkmenia, and Kaliningrad in the West to Ratmanov in the Bering Strait is like covering

half of Europe and one-third of Asia, so you've got to do a little lining up. But I never saw a single beggar or I never heard of anybody sleeping in the streets or under old copies of *Pravda* on park benches, or starting a squatters movement, because there were no houses or flats. Everybody ate and everybody had somewhere to go when they finished work.

Everybody worked and nobody begged. Unless maybe you saw some strolling Gypsies. But they didn't beg. They told your fortune in exchange for a few silver kopecks. But then one expects that of Gypsies. Somehow one gets the idea that nothing can be done to keep Gypsies settled in one place. There is a joke that these *Tsygane* were the only community which defeated Marxism-Leninism. But that's only a quip. Great numbers of them have settled down and work in factories and other enterprises, just like other Soviet citizens. But some of them are still found popping up in their distinguishing clothes and spangles and brown faces with gold teeth. If a wandering Gypsy can sport a mouthful of gold teeth she must be doing alright. I never saw a Gypsy with gold teeth outside the USSR.

We were walking in the memorial park in Alma Ata and three Gypsy women suddenly appeared on the pathway and I couldn't resist having my hand read again, and I stopped them and they grouped around laughing and chattering in Russian with their own particular accent. I wanted to find out if what they told me would be different from that time in Leningrad some years back. It was different. So, now I'm not going to have my palm read again, because the third time may prove lucky.

But as I said, not all Gypsies wander about; and if they do nobody bothers them. When the socialist revolution of 1917 gave all nationalities living in the Russian Empire their freedom, that included the Gypsies.*

They have their own newspapers and collective farms, and, of course, their own Gypsy Theatre. When the idea

* A government decision of August 30, 1926 gave the Gypsies plots of land, followed by a decision of October 1, 1926, providing for aid to Gypsies wishing to settle down and quit their nomadic way of life.–*Ed.*

of a genuine Gypsy theatre was first discussed A. V. Lunacharsky jumped at it. He was Minister of Education then. The Romany Theatre was founded in 1931.* Non-Romany members of the theatrical profession helped, for instance, the actors from the Moscow Art Theatre. Romanies fought Hitler and their theatre entertained the troops. Many of the plays are about the way Gypsies have become Soviet citizens, not by being assimilated or swamped, but by the genuine and warm preservation of their language, culture and traditions in the great multinational state. However, they are not as provincial as most would expect. They can perform Cervantes, and Indian artists helped them put on an Indian play, and others, as Hungarians, for example, did the same.

And if anybody enjoys Gypsy music as I do, then he should hear Raissa Udovikova or Nina Pankova or Zolotogradov or Volshaninova. Among the best, musical concerts I attended in the USSR included Gypsy artists: the deep voices rise to high passion, while the guitars throb and tinkle. But I won't have my hand read a third time.

Change Planes for a Dream

The sky above Kazakhstan covers an area of more than 2,717 thousand square kilometres, and far below, as the plane took us north from Alma Ata to lowlands, was a riffled blur of yellow and brown with rivers dribbling out of Lake Balkhash which lay like a thick blob on a microscope slide across the map. The plane was an AN-24 and it was full of people with packages, bundles and suitcases. The stewardesses are in command, but neither superior nor subservient, and they brought bottles of mineral water and admonished those who wandered about the aircraft for no genuine reason. They were often in demand: it was '*devushka* (girl) this and *devushka* that', while Kazakhstan moved away far below, the high steppelands of the interior unrolling themselves like a dusty mat.

Out of the other republics of the Soviet Union, Kazakh-

* The Romany Theatre is the only professional Gypsy theatre in the world.–*Ed.*

stan is second in area (after the Russian Federation), and third in population (after the Russian Federation and the Ukraine); its population is 14 million.

The October Socialist Revolution revealed for the people of Central Asia and Kazakhstan the possibility of transition to socialism, bypassing capitalism. The major condition for this transition was the alliance with the proletariat of Russia and the subsequent fraternal friendship and mutual assistance of all the peoples of the USSR.

The material, political and organisational assistance rendered especially by the industrial regions of Russia and the Ukraine was the decisive condition for the swift industrialisation of these republics. To hasten the economic advance of the Central Asian and Kazakh republics, the Soviet Government built industrial centres there, first by restoring or providing equipment for existing enterprises and by moving factories and workshops there from central regions. This action played a large part in consolidating the alliance of people in the central regions with the borderlands and thus sped up the productive forces in the Eastern Soviet states.

Regions like Kazakhstan had to be industrialised in the absence of large-scale industry and the personnel capable of managing it. These and other problems were eliminated by the new social system, fraternal co-operation and mutual assistance.

The socialist industrialisation in the USSR had practically led to an evening of the economies of once backward non-Russian areas and the central regions, and the rate of industrial development in Central Asia and Kazakhstan went up so much as to considerably outstrip the average growth rates for the USSR as a whole.

In turn, the working people of the Eastern Soviet republics contributed to the further advance of the USSR by supplying the country with increasing quantities of valuable raw materials, karakul and the products of the engineering industry and others. In department stores I saw refrigerators and electrical equipment manufactured in Soviet Asia.

Thus, these republics have taken an important place in the countrywide division of labour, and moreover, have

also developed extensive international economic ties. Their industrial output is exported to more than one hundred countries—socialist, newly independent and capitalist.

In addition, the socialist transformation of *agriculture* was a major precondition for the socio-economic and cultural progress in Central Asia and Kazakhstan. This task was accomplished throughout the Soviet Union on the basis of Lenin's co-operative plan which became the turning-point towards socialism for the peasantry of the central areas as well as the East. He pointed out that the peasant masses were small owners, that it was impossible to lead them to socialism in a brief period, that it was necessary to prepare them by gradual measures for the comprehension and acceptance of socialist principles.

Land and water reforms, carried out mainly in the 1920s, were the main link in the chain of those plans for a transitional nature in conditions of Central Asia and Kazakhstan. In the course of this the consequences of tsarism's colonial policy were eliminated: local peasants and Russian settlers were equalised in rights to use water and land, patriarchal relations were abolished, the land of the *bais*, the Asiatic rural upper class, above the established quota was confiscated and handed over free of charge to landless peasants. Confiscated livestock was also handed over to poor peasants, agricultural labourers and less-propertied middle peasants.

The abolition of feudal and semi-feudal relations in agriculture progressed in stages over more than ten years. The land and water reforms fundamentally changed the socio-economic relations in the countryside. The agrarian changes in the 1920s helped create understanding of various forms of co-operation. Co-operatives proved to be the most successful form for moving onto the path of socialism, not only for the Russian peasants, but also for those of Central Asia and Kazakhstan.

First there were simple trade, credit and marketing co-operatives. These loosened the grip of middlemen, money-lenders and the remaining rich peasants. Then producers' co-ops, machine and seed supply organisations,

organisations for joint farming and similar enterprises spread.

The successes achieved in agricultural co-operation accelerated the emergence of new socialist attitudes in the countryside: collective (*kolkhoz*) and state (*sovkhoz*) farms came to be the bearers of these relations.

A new stage in the co-operative plan began in the early 1930s with the gradual establishment of the collective farm system. This stage came to be known as *collectivisation*. Its characteristics in the Asiatic regions were that the socialist reorganisation was closely interlinked with the elimination of the remains of pre-capitalist, patriarchal-tribal way of life. Collectivisation was simultaneously accompanied by the settlement of the nomad and semi-nomad population.

In particular, all this meant that peasants no longer had to pay rent to landlords, that their debts to banks were wiped out, apart from the distribution of land, livestock and implements among them. These steps alone, however, were not enough: mere transfer of land did not end poverty. Poverty and destitution could only be ended by large-scale farming, making it possible to use up-to-date machinery and scientific methods, all co-operatively organised. The state provided resources for the construction of houses, hospitals, farm buildings, machine and mowing stations, and so on. Financial, tax and other concessions were provided.

By the second half of the 1930s, the socialisation of agriculture had succeeded everywhere. Collective farms became the main producers of agricultural marketing. As laid down by the collective farm rules, every farm member is also entitled to his own small plot and his own house. He can own cattle, sheep, poultry and grow fruit and vegetables for his own family and for sale.

Control is in the hands of the general meeting of the farm's members, who decide all important affairs: production and sales, output quotas, methods of payment for work and the distribution of the farm income. Manpower is divided into brigades and the work as a whole is directed by qualified agronomists, vets, and so on.

Farmers receive a guaranteed wage for their work, just

like industrial workers, plus various extra benefits which the farm economy can afford. Collectivisation delivered millions of peasants from bondage, from ruin and poverty. The class of individual peasants was replaced by a new class–the collective farm peasantry, previously unknown.

The Balkhash stop-over was far behind–the little dusty airport on the lake where we had had tea and hard-boiled eggs and black bread at the buffet: we ate hastily, for by the time we had gathered around the stand-up tables, the tannoy was already calling passengers for the north to get ready to board. A few hours later we were landing at Tselinograd.

Most Soviet internal airports are more like bus terminals. Austere in the main, there is little of the glitter and artificial façade of wealth seen in the outside terminals: the displays of Channel Number 5, the expensive tape recorders, harassed or casual businessmen and strident tourists. Here were peasant women in shawls sitting guard over bundles and suitcases and bags of produce (perhaps they were off to visit relations in the next town), waiting for a flight to be called; workers in ill-fitting suits or jackets and trousers that did not match going off to some new site; children trying to escape onto the tarmac to see the planes; soldiers, executives, technicians, smoking as they stood around carrying their thick briefcases.

Tselinograd was like that, a place where you merely waited for a plane, and we waited for the final stage of this flight. Somewhere in the general area, too, was the Baikonur space centre where they were then preparing to launch the Soyuz-Apollo project. Watching an old woman sweeping the worn concrete floor with her reed broom one found it hard to believe that in the general vicinity a great cosmic event was being prepared; even one could not associate the blue-suited Aeroflot girls, strutting ahead of parties of departing passengers, with the count-down to the lift-off. Still, they had come to mount the stars, these who had lived under feudalism only a century ago. I recalled the words of Cuba's Nicolas Guillén: 'Passengers en route, change your plane for a dream!'

We were in the middle of the great plains of Kazakhstan, the vast steppelands, the Virgin Lands as they were

called, although the ploughs and tractors had already deflowered them. It was chilly outside, beyond the double swing-doors, the temperature stood at nine degrees.

Notes Above Ground Level

The plane was heading up the map. Lost behind us were the Pamir and Altai mountains, the harsh deserts being watered by newly dug canals, the ruffled-looking wilderness of South Kazakhstan. Through the window of AN-24 I could see, below the thin, drifting puff-ball clouds, the great plains of the north. These were the steppes of Kazakhstan, mile after mile of earth now cultivated into rectangles of green, black, dark-brown; flat, like carpets nailed to the floor of the world. The great prairies that had once been empty were now settled mostly by volunteers who had left an old life behind to open up these vast stretches and give them a productive life.

I left my *Ramayana* for the sight of the great expanses passing by below. The ancient war in Ceylon dropped from my memory, 'Sound of trumpet and of bugle, drum and horn and echoing shell, and the neigh of charging courses and the tuskers' dying wail', while I pondered over the dauntless of latter-day frontiersmen who had turned over this endless emptiness into vast square miles of wheat and pastureland, exposed the mineral wealth.

Once backward, one could say. But really, what is 'backward'? Around the years 950 to 1050 the territory known today as Central Asia and Kazakhstan produced such outstanding scientists and thinkers as ibn-Sina whom the Europeans called Avicenna, who wrote many remarkable works on medicine, philosophy and natural sciences.

I once chatted with a European who took pains to convince me that Ancient Greece was the cradle of all 'civilisation' and 'knowledge', therefore of Western 'superiority'. Finding the debate hopeless in the face of bigotry and chauvinism, I conceded, asking whether it was not possible that the wisdom from his wonderful fountain might not have flowed in *all* directions and not only due west? 'Impossible,' he snorted, 'the Aegean Sea was in the way.'

What could convince him, in his navy-blue City of London suit and shiny shoes, the neat striped shirt, that there had been a scholar-encyclopaedist called Al-Farabi in a faraway place now called South Kazakhstan in the ninth-tenth centuries or that there had been an Alisher Navoi, an Uzbek poet, in the fifteenth century about the same time that Europe was experiencing its Renaissance? That there was great poetry in Arabic and Persian?

The Arabic and Persian languages did play a major role in the political and cultural life of the Central Asian peoples. These two languages became a means of inter-tribal and international communications, fulfilled social functions right up to the October Revolution, much in the same way Latin must have done in medieval Europe. But for this reason there was a lag in the development of the modern literary languages of the native peoples in Central Asia and Kazakhstan, of their social functions.

The retarded development of the languages of the local population was one of the reasons for cultural backwardness, the mass of whom were illiterate and knew no other languages than their native tongues.

During tsarist times not a single higher educational establishment was to be found in the region. The few so-called Russian-native and other schools had no notable influence on the functional development of the Uzbek, Kazakh and other languages of Central Asia. Before the Revolution these languages were used mainly for everyday intercourse.

Tsarism feared popular education, feared the development of their cultures and languages, their growing national awareness. The Communists, on the other hand, inspired by Lenin's approach, prevented the suppression of the cultures and languages of national minorities and oppressed peoples; they did not impose assimilation; they did not allow small nations or their languages and cultures to be absorbed by large nations or by their languages and cultures, but sought to effect the utmost development and mutual enrichment of big and small nations and nationalities, of their cultures and languages.

This was a development of Marx's idea that one nation could and should learn from others. It opposed the con-

ception of bourgeois theoreticians' policy of the absorbing of the small nations' cultures by those of large nations: the idea of familiarisation of the people not with national culture, but rather with European culture, which was supposedly becoming a world culture; the theory that Europe was the source of wisdom (it was the man in the navy-blue City of London suit, the starched collar all over again) based on the underestimation of the enormous contribution made by the non-European peoples to the development of mankind.

The 10th Congress of the Communist Party in 1921 adopted a programme for raising the cultural level, developing their cultures and languages. It was the task of the Communists to help the people develop and consolidate the Soviet statehood in conformity with national and domestic conditions; create their own courts of law, administration, organs of government operating in their native languages and comprising of local people who knew the life and psychology of the local population; develop their own press, schools, theatrical activities, cultural and educational institutions in their own native languages; develop a network of courses for general education and vocational training in their native languages.

This programme was not encouraged, as some would have it, for 'propaganda purposes'. All the time it was pointed out that the mother tongue was the most important and most popularly understandable medium for expressing national culture; all cognition was more effectively carried on in the native language, if the people concerned did not widely use another language in everyday life; an illiterate people who did not know a developed literary language could achieve greater success in eliminating illiteracy in a short time and raising their educational level only in their native tongue.

Lenin said once that Marxists maintained that the population must be provided with schools where teaching will be carried on in all local languages, that a basic law had to be introduced in the constitution to guarantee there would be no privileges of any one nation and no violation of the rights of national minorities.

The native languages played a large role in the train-

ing of specialists. These languages, particularly in the Union republics, eventually came to occupy a dominant position first in training cadres with a secondary education and then in other spheres. The need for training, practically from scratch, a national intelligentsia, together with the need to invest the old cultural heritage with a democratic ideology, also presented problems and involved a struggle not so much against bourgeois, as against patriarchal-feudal ideology.

The slogan of those years was: in their political, economic and cultural development, the peoples of the former national borderlands must catch up with the advanced peoples of Russia within the shortest possible historical period.

The important spheres of the intellectual development of any present-day nation are public education at all levels, the main branches of sciences, belles-lettres, art, the mass media. In the development of the spheres of Central Asian and Kazakh life, a veritable cultural revolution took place in which a highly significant role was played by the extensive use of national literary languages.

Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and neighbouring republics have become socialist states with a highly developed science and technology. Before the Revolution not a single research institute was to be found there. In 1975, the five national academies of sciences united 110 scientific centres. The region has a total of several hundred research institutions employing 80,000 scientific workers. Literature in the sciences is published in Kazakh, Uzbek, Kirghiz, Tajik and Turkmen languages. In 1975, 104 scientific, socio-political and literary journals and other periodicals, and 460 newspapers were published in the aforementioned languages. A great number of books and booklets were published in the same year: 2,918 titles in more than forty-nine million copies.

In the initial period attention was paid primarily to the development of national folk cultures because of the desire to put into the utmost effect everything positive in each distinctive national culture. At the same time, the USSR has always been in opposition to nationalistic and purist tendencies in the development of cultures and languages,

taking into account the dangers of cultures becoming mutually isolated, of the emergence of language barriers; encouraging the necessity to mutually enrich national cultures and languages.

This meant a simultaneous struggle against confining the development of intellectual life and social consciousness of each people to their distinctive folk culture based solely on the native language. Self-isolation and self-restriction on the basis of 'purity' and 'originality' is harmful and unsound. The morality of the belligerent nationalist–a most dangerous enemy of a multinational state–is alien to the Soviet people, none of them show any desire to withdraw into the national 'ego'.

Over the years of socialist construction in the USSR, a new historical community of people has emerged, namely, the *Soviet* people. During the rise of such a community, general Soviet elements took shape in the national cultures, a sort of thread uniting everybody in spite of nationality. The formation and growth of general Soviet culture is taking place on the foundation of the growing social, economic, moral-political and ideological unity of Soviet society. The Soviet socialist culture, in which the national and the international are dialectically combined, is now being seen as the prototype of a future world communist culture.

At the same time, as the conditions for the free and unhampered function and development of national languages were set forth, the Soviet Government paid regard to the social need for the Russian language, one of the equal languages of the USSR, as the common language of intercommunication among all Soviet peoples. The language of the intercourse among nations is called on to function as that of promoting fraternal co-operation in social, political, cultural, economic and scientific fields, for engaging in everyday relations and maintaining permanent contact and unity.

'Cherchez la Femme'

All this was part of the *cultural revolution* which formed a link in the socialist transformation of the coun-

try. It was impossible to build socialism while illiteracy and ignorance prevailed, since socialism can only be created by conscious, energetic creative effort of the masses. The cultural revolution is an objective historical necessity for and during the transition to socialism.

Inclusive of this revolution was also the titanic task of actually emancipating women and drawing them into active social life and socialist production, a task particularly important for the full cultural emergence among the peoples of the old colonial borderlands.

Now almost half of all pupils and students in all fields of the educational system are girls of local nationalities—one of the greatest achievements of the cultural revolution in the Eastern Soviet republics. Co-education and also the establishment of women's pedagogical institutes and a network of women's clubs, etc., played a tremendous part in combating feudal survivals in the attitude to women. The extensive explanatory work, drawing girls of local nationalities into schools, had also to be accompanied by a certain degree of compulsion against those who maliciously sought to maintain the survivals of feudalism.

The position of women changed radically in the Soviet East during the building of socialism. This in turn had its effect on the family way of life. Such customs as polygamy, the giving in marriage of minors and wearing of the *paranja, yashmak* and *chichvan,* forms of dress or veil covering the face, were abolished, and the marriage procedure was changed.

I found no section of life—in production, social, political or cultural activity—where women are not working and displaying their abilities. It has been shown in the Soviet Union, and indeed the experience of history must demonstrate, that it would be impossible to build socialism successfully without the widest enlistment of the female of the human species.

Fifty-one million women go to work every day in the Soviet Union, women make up at least half the students in colleges and secondary technical schools; of every one thousand women, 739 have at least secondary education. Teaching and medicine are the most popular professions among them and they make up 49 per cent of scientific

workers; they are shop managers and factory directors, engineers and technicians and, perhaps inevitably, in charge of public catering.

It was a woman's voice that drew me from my whispering and muttering into my tape recorder. The blue-clad Aeroflot stewardess was coming down the aisle collecting empty mineral water bottles and announcing that we were about to descend for the last stop of this lap of my journey.

Faraway Places

Kokchetav isn't the northernmost part of Kazakhstan. About a hundred miles further up the line is Petropavlovsk and beyond that you come to Western Siberia of the Russian Federation where the colour of the map changes from the yellow plains to the great forest country, but Kokchetav lies on the border of the woodland, where the plains dwindle away, sucked in by the forests.

It was a small provincial town with a broad main street that was flanked by irrigation canals, with the hotel on it and across the way was the main post office. There was the department store and the Palace of Weddings and on an ornamental square was the maroon-fronted building of the local Soviet, the offices of the District Communist Party, and then the side-walk lined a park with trees and shrubbery and the usual couples sitting on benches talking or someone reading *Soviet Sport.* From the children's school of music came the sound of a violin, and there were blocks of new flats with blue balconies among the old-style Russian houses and wooden cottages. The town lay along low hills and by a kidney-shaped lake which one meets after walking along a winding road outside the town.

The road into town was flanked by ranks of electric pylons, giants on tall steel legs, glaring with blank porcelain insulator eyes, their tentacles of power lines supplying the entire surrounding region with power.

It was a very quiet town and looked as if few foreigners ever came this far north in Kazakhstan. So I felt like a rare explorer, more so when we went to the post office

to send a cable home to my wife, 'Greetings from Northern Kazakhstan', and it never reached her because the clerk, probably, did not handle international telegrams every day and made a mistake somewhere. I did have a feeling I was doing a rare thing, sending that cable, because this place was extremely far away. That was just being boyish really, because ever since I had been a child I had dreamed of faraway places. 'Faraway places with strange-sounding names,' the popular song goes. Anyway the cable never arrived and I might as well have been at the Mountains of the Moon.

Kokchetav. I had never heard of Kokchetav until I was in Alma Ata. I had been to Bamako in Mali, and seen the war zone around Hanoi and Haiphong; I had been in Santiago, Chile, a few months before they killed Allende, and had seen the ruins of old Panama that the pirate Henry Morgan burned; and it had been amusing sailing down the Panama Canal eating from the lunch boxes of Colonel Sander's Kentucky Fried Chicken (by courtesy of the Panama Canal Company), but never had I heard of a town called Kokchetav. It didn't have a romantic-sounding name, like Samarkand or Bukhara or Chikunda, South Africa, although I have never been to Chikunda, South Africa.

They say a person rarely ever gets to know his own country well enough, and on the map Chikunda looks as far north in South Africa, as Kokchetav in Kazakhstan. But I have seen the inside of the Johannesburg Fort prison, but even that isn't like being locked up in the Peter and Paul Fortress in St. Petersburg. Thinking back, the furthest north I ever got in South Africa was the criminal court in Pretoria when I and others were tried for treason against the government.

But here I was in this place Kokchetav, with the statue of Vambery who had been a traveller, scientist, geographer, and another of the first Kazakh democrats, a tall handsome figure in a granite officer's greatcoat. He had been an officer in the tsar's army and was supposed to be a descendant of Genghis Khan himself, no less. His grandfather Alikhan had been called the last Khan of the Tatar hordes.

'Kokchetav means blue mountains,' Amangeldeh explained. He was a cheerful fellow, short and bespectacled, with black hair and a face like young Mister Moto, the fictional Japanese detective, I thought, and wore a beautifully fitting dark suit when he met us at the airport and looked very eager.

'But where are the mountains?' I asked. There were only low hills and the kidney-shaped lake, I think, was called Kopa.

'Thereby hangs a tale,' he said, or the Russian equivalent thereof. 'You see, when the tsarist troops first came up here they had heard of the famous Blue Mountains and meant to establish a colony on the spot. They met some of the local population and asked the way. The wily locals thereupon pointed in the wrong direction, towards this site, so Kokchetav sprang up here.' He chuckled merrily, as if he himself had had something to do with outwitting the tsarist troops.

There was the courtesy visit to the District Party offices where the First Secretary and others welcomed us. For the most part it was like other Party offices: the polished tables and desks, the papers neatly arranged, the portrait of Lenin. The intercom buzzed while we chatted. You got all the gen at the *Obkom*, which is short for regional committee, before setting out. In any case, we learned that Kokchetav, for all its quiet provincial look, was the centre of a region covering seventy-eight thousand square kilometres of the Virgin Lands; that it administered fifteen agricultural districts and connected four other towns, 116 state farms and twenty-five collective farms; and that the region encompassed a population of more than 600,000. Kokchetav now housed ninety-three thousand citizens. It was a relatively young town, about one hundred and fifty years old. That must have been when the tsar's troops moved in, thinking they were in the Blue Mountains. But the region had really started developing over the past fifteen years as the machine factories and other industries grew, and the numerous rest-homes, sanatoria and holiday spots were set up.

The intercom buzzed again and one of the secretaries talked into it. The First Secretary was saying: 'You know,

this region is the homeland not only of the Kazakhs, but of forty different nationalities. We have Ukrainians, Russians, Lithuanians, Byelorussians, Germans and Poles. All the collective and state farms are multinational.'

One might make clear the difference between a collective and a state farm. A collective farm belongs to the community of local farmers who originally formed it, the land being granted to them in perpetuity. A state farm belongs to the government. Up here in Northern Kazakhstan, for instance, the huge tracts of country had stood empty and undeveloped for ages and then the Soviet Government had called for volunteers from all over the country to go in and establish farms, to 'plough the fields and scatter the good seed'. Thus, people came from everywhere, giving up old homes to begin new ones here in the vast emptiness. They were mostly *Komsomols,* Communist youth, and they became the twentieth-century frontier families.

The sky was heavy and grey and we went up a street on a hillside that led to the Kuibyshev museum. This was actually where Valerian Kuibyshev, one of the Revolution's most famous heroes, had grown up, and there was a wooden house surrounded by trees, with a stable or coach-house at the back and a particular memorial tree planted by his mother in 1903 in memory of Valerian's brother accidentally shot and killed by a friend. I found it to be one of the Soviet Union's most interesting little museums, dedicated to a really tough revolutionary. As a boy Kuibyshev had started taking part in the anti-tsarist movement and then in the days of the Bolshevik struggle had led troops against the White Guards in the Civil War. I think he was one of those revolutionaries in the true spirit of the Revolution. Of course, there were also Amangeldeh Imanov and Alibi Janghildin who are national heroes of the Revolution in Kazakhstan, but no one who reads the history of the Soviet Union can miss out Valerian Kuibyshev. At the bottom of the hill from the house there is a statue of him, an impression in stone of all the dedication that goes with being a real revolutionary.

Outside the Palace of Weddings a line of red-berib-

boned cars were drawn up waiting for their bridal parties, while from inside Mendelssohn's wedding march came down into the street. We went by the Palace of Culture, the *Dom Kultury* one could never miss, which belonged to the local railway workers.

The Sky Is with Me

Out at the Yeslovetsky State Farm youths raised dust in the village street with their bicycles, and there were children in the little square where the farm leaders met us outside the administrative centre: the farm chairman, the local Party secretary and heads of the workers committees.

This was a big farm even though one would not judge it so from the ordinary-looking village houses with their picket fences. But there was more building going on on the outskirts. We had to look in on the local amenities, of course: the *stolovaya* or public dining-room, the village department store and the club where they held their general meetings; the political study room with desks and the walls decorated in red, and the library.

'We have one thousand and six hundred children and two thousand and five hundred grown-ups,' the farm chairman said with some pride, leading the way towards the long hothouses of the inevitable cucumbers. He introduced us to the 'commissar' for cucumbers, a young agronomist who had been working there for two years. I wondered how one became attracted to cucumbers, but gave up the thought as they told us that presently collective and state farm wages were generally the same all over the Soviet Union, and, perhaps, there was time to go into the fields.

This farm covered 19,000 hectares and when we went out along the road through the stretches being prepared for spring sowing, land stretched for miles, ploughed in straight lines, while far away the awkward-looking machines shambled slowly like mechanical toys on a rug.

After driving for more miles with the late afternoon sun beginning to lower in the width of the sky, there was a farm outstation suddenly in the middle of the landscape, a cluster of neat fenced-in buildings and a pair of

stubby trucks parked outside, with a jeep and a motorcycle and sidecar.

This was a farm-brigade headquarters, and a heavy man with a moustache shook hands and introduced himself as Rashid Gabardolin, the head of the brigade operating in that section. He had two units of twenty-four men each working in shifts to plough or sow 3,000 hectares, and a hundred vehicles of various kinds in his charge. They all lived out in these stations during their shifts and went home to the central village after they had finished.

Gabardolin took us around the tiny settlement of four buildings. There was a board with targets achieved by each worker and the wages due and the quotas of the brigades. Inside there was a library and game room for those off duty, and some men lay on beds in the bunkhouse reading *Komsomolskaya Pravda* and *Soviet Film.* Two young girls, Galya and Sveta, were preparing the evening meal in the kitchen. They were trainees in the catering service and were doing part of their apprenticeship out here. That night there would be *borshch* and stew, salad, bread and tea, apart from other items on the menu they showed us. A full dinner cost fifty kopecks.

Outside a man at the jeep, which the Soviets nicknamed *kosyol,* which means goat because it is supposed to be able to go anywhere, was speaking over a walkie-talkie, communicating with somebody far out in the fields. The sky was less grey, like dusty glass.

Rashid Gabardolin read from the displayed notice-board the names of those who had fulfilled or overfulfilled their work quotas, and again the names were Kazakh, Ukrainian, Tatar, Russian, German. 'We have a happy family,' he smiled under the moustache. 'Now we are trying to get the spring sowing done in time and everybody is pulling their weight.' They were sowing maize, a lot of which would go for cattle fodder, and he said, trotting out another of those Kazakh proverbs, a little inappropriate this time, I thought as we shook hands: 'We say when we get a good guest, the ewe will bear two lambs.'

On the way back we parked at the edge of a field road and watched a tractor dragging a plough come clattering down a row towards us. All around the earth lay neatly

ruffled. The tractor driver pulled up and climbed down to greet the farm chairman and the rest of us. Behind and around the plough-discs the earth was striped like brown corduroy. He was smiling and unshaven and his handshake was gritty with soil and callouses. 'Stasov Victor,' he said, pushing his cap up from his dusty forehead.

'Isn't it knock-off time?' I asked.

'*Da,* five o'clock,' he said. 'But I have to get this field done as soon as possible because of the sowing. So I'll carry on until it gets dark.'

He raised a soiled hand in salute and climbed, smiling, back into the cabin, the tractor motor revved and roared and then clattered away, the discs churning up the soil. We went through the fields, taking a short cut back to the centre, passing some men working on a stalled tractor.

On the way we stopped at the cow-sheds. Two matronly women were piling hay. We shuffled our shoes in the trays of disinfectant at the door and went in where the mechanical milking machines jiggled at the udders and the cows looked patiently over their stalls, lowing dolefully with that appearance cows have. The shed had the usual smell of stables. The milkmaids, who were pitching hay, greeted us; they were blonde women in white overalls, leaning on their pitchforks for a while.

They were on the afternoon shift that had started at two o'clock.

'Were you born in these parts?' I asked one of them who was big and blonde and motherly, Valentina Ulyanova.

She shook her head. '*Nyet,*' she said smiling. '*Sibir.* I'm from Siberia.' Siberia wasn't really far away: a few hundred miles north-east was Omsk.

She was one of the farm award winners, but she shook her head again at my congratulations. 'Everybody helped,' she said. 'I just really represent them all.' She had a daughter who was a nurse, she said, and a son finishing technical college, and then there was her youngest girl in the fifth grade. We left them pitching hay–Valentina Ulyanova and Maria Ivanova, milkmaids.

'The women play a very big part,' the chairman said as we strolled in the village as dusk approached. 'Here,

out of fifty-five subcommittee secretaries, nineteen are women. They are also deputy officials, and so on, serving in many capacities. Thirty one per cent of the Communist Party here are women.'

I thought, perhaps, the Soviet Union was becoming a matriarchal society, especially recalling the legions of hefty, middle-aged or elderly women who stood guard in the foyers of most public or official buildings, and who seemed to be in charge of so many places and enterprises. A petticoat government, the old description said; but there had been the war too and it was hard for a country to lose over twenty million people.

We had time to look at the local bookstore; they had a large selection of books, from technical and scientific works, school texts, to fiction and, lo and behold, Murat unearthed a copy of South African stories which included one of my own. When you heard that one of your works had been translated, you thought first of bookshops in the relative capital cities or, perhaps, universities–but off the beaten track bookshops on farms far off in the steppes of Asia never entered your mind. *Slava trudu* (Glory to Labour), as they said here.

That inspired me to dig in my luggage for my copy of Abai Kunanbayev. It was a gesture made in my hotel room. Outside the lamplight lay dimly on the trees that rustled along the street and I needed to read before falling asleep anyway. I chose a page at random and read, waiting for sleep, the usual hospitality of another farm village lying wearily on my eyelids. 'The mullah with his mighty turban, who twists our laws in every way, while looking wise and very urban, is he not a bird of prey? From any soul that's mean and dark....'

In the morning the sky was clear and sunny and we drank birch-tree juice at the stall outside the hotel while we waited for Amangeldeh whom I had dubbed *El Commandante,* because at first I kept on forgetting his name. Later on, of course, I became used to pronouncing it, but I still called him *Commandante.*

I was with Larissa and Murat and it occurred to me that Murat was the son of that Auezov who had been a very famous writer and historian in Kazakhstan and had writ-

ten those epics about Abai Kunanbayev whose work was in my luggage along with the *Ramayana* of course. He was very quiet and shy, a rather nervous young man. Auezov Junior, I mean, who was accompanying us all over Kazakhstan and I think it was because everybody was always introducing him as the son of a famous celebrity and he wanted to do his own thing and make a reputation for himself and be known for that. He *was* doing so, making a reputation in literature, and he was a very likeable companion to have on the trip.

So we were waiting to go up to this place called Arikbalik. And so when *El Commandante* turned up with the car we set out. You won't find it on a large-scale map, although I think a place that has a name like that which rolls so pleasantly on the tongue should have a place on the map. There are places up there like Shchuchinsk, which foreigners would find hard to pronounce, but are very pleasant to visit, in spite of that.

On Borodin

But now we were on our way to Arikbalik and there were the prairies again, the miles of khaki-coloured flatness going by. All over Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan I was reminded always of Borodin's *In the Steppes of Central Asia,* which had been composed in 1880. The scenario attached to the score goes something like this: over the monotonous steppes of Central Asia sound the unaccustomed strains of a peaceful Russian song. From the distance are heard the sounds of horses and camels and a characteristic Oriental melody. A native caravan approaches and passes on safe and carefree through the boundless desert under the protection of Russian arms. Further and further it goes into the desert and the Russian song and Asiatic melody combine to form a common harmony whose echo dies away gradually in the air of the boundless steppes.

Borodin dedicated that to Liszt. I never found out why. But Borodin is a favourite with me and the music of the Polovtsian dances from *Prince Igor* they turned into a popular song in the West, but it still sounds al-

right when you whistle it and forget the words they attached to it: 'Hold my hand. I'm a stranger in Paradise. . . .'

I stopped thinking of Borodin, because we were driving up a road with cottages scattered on each side and youngsters on bicycles and electric standards and then we were turning into a parking lot which was the district headquarters for Arikbalik.

From here they administered 192,000 hectares of farmland and eight state farms. The town population was 31,000, but the town seemed quiet, with most of the people at work. There were eight secondary schools and fifteen state farm schools, and the land was given mostly over to corn and cattle, horses, pigs and poultry. Vegetables were confined to only 520 hectares and that was enough for the district consumption.

All this and more we got from the admin-centre, of course, by way of Comrade Nikolai Nishnikov, who was from the regional Communist Party. 'According to reports to be delivered at the 25th Congress all the goals of this district are being fulfilled,' he announced, launching into the preliminaries. 'Although 1974 was a very dry period.'

As is typical of the Virgin Lands, the local population was a mixture of nationalities from many parts of the Soviet Union, as well as the local Kazakhs. 'We have become one international family, typical of the new Soviet people,' Nishnikov said. 'Our only problem now lies in the cultural level. What I mean is we don't have any large theatre or ballet or opera companies. But from the position of the mass media we have everything we need, newspapers, TV and radio. Everybody has either a television set or a radio, and often both. The people usually go on tourist trips for their holidays or travel down to the Black Sea and such places. In general there is a levelling out in the average conditions of the rural and city populations.'

Afterwards we climbed a hill at the top of which there was a war memorial and laid bouquets of flowers there. There were many other bunches of flowers, tied with ribbons. Everywhere in the Soviet Union, in cities, towns and farm villages there is a memorial for those who died in the Great Patriotic War; some are gigantic and monolith-

ic, others are small and humble, but all have that aura of deep emotion that is heightened by the custom of married couples to lay their wedding bouquets at the foot of these monuments: perhaps, it is a dedication to a past generation or a promise to the next. One got the impression that these little bouquets had greater meaning than the grand wreaths that had to be carried by several people presented by important delegations and visiting dignitaries.

The Young Guard

We were going out to one of the farms.

There was the farm village some miles out on the prairie: the country streets with the wooden fences, a cow, a tractor and harvester park, and far beyond, horses grazing on the plains that were interrupted even further away by stands of forest, and on the horizon, a line of low hills like stains along the bottom of the blue glass of the sky.

One of the deputies of the director of this farm took charge of our party. They had a poultry hatchery and a brewery (one of the two in the district) and I always remembered they had this entire brewery whenever a waitress at an hotel said, '*Piva net* (no beer).' The farm was called Pravda and stretched over 40,000 hectares and going far out into the fields our driver waved down a truck laden with workers going off shift.

They all turned out to be a brigade of teenage schoolgoers, with dusty faces and wearing high boots. There was a teacher with them and he explained it was part of the curriculum to do two months of agricultural work. They were all in the ninth class and had been sowing wheat and some of them meant to be tractor drivers or go into technical school after the tenth class. They were all young and wanted to have their picture taken with me by Pyotr, the young man who was with us from Kazakh Film. Then they all climbed aboard again and the truck took off down the road raising a cloud of dust between the expanses of furrowed land on each side.

There were tractors pulling the sowers in the distance

and on the roadside some men were doing something to a sower that seemed to have broken down.

There was a little man with a true Tatar face under a rough fur cap with ear-flaps loose, and he looked all muscle and the wrinkles of his face were dark with dust. Shaking hands, he said shyly that he was sorry he wasn't wearing his best clothes to meet us. He had hard calloused hands and an impish Mongoloid grin. He was really a little man, but tough, whom you would probably nickname 'Shorty' in any language.

The sower had a sort of container full of seed on the back and an arrangement that let the seed drop out into the furrows and then what looked like claws to cover up the seed. That's the best I can describe a sower, not being a farming man, and only an onlooker, but I know the earth was very dark, almost black, and moist in these parts.

Then there was another one of those little outstations from which the brigades operated–sixty in this brigade, the manager reported. 'No,' he said, 'it's not really lonely out here. Now that it's spring sowing there's no time to be lonely. The yield of corn is going to depend on how fast we work.' There were forty-nine brigades working in this region.

There was a slogan on a wall of the station which said: 'Bread is the wealth of our motherland, let us do our best to raise the yield.'

The head of the brigade was German, the manager a Pole and director a Kazakh. There were the two now usual young girls doing the cooking; they ordinarily worked a seven-hour stint, but because of the sowing they were going to put in ten hours. A compensatory leave is given for overworked hours. They were chubby young girls in white overalls and head-cloths and really looked as if they were playing at house, standing by the gas ranges and telling us there would be soup, cutlets and *kompot* (compote).

We passed the vast cultivated areas, the miles of machine-churned earth. It was Africa Day that day and I thought of the thousands of African peasants still hacking at the hot soil with old-fashioned mattocks and hoes, striv-

ing to raise crops from the *shambas,* the little plots, and African countries which were starting to reorganise their economies after years of colonialism: Ethiopia and the Congo and others, struggling out of the past.

The cultivation fell away and we drove into grasslands, our car bouncing by the rough track that wound across the countryside. The trees drew near and we passed a forest of young birch trees. There were thin clouds like smears on the flat sky. The distance was almost interminable and the trees receded again as we circled the birch forest and, circling the trees, there was another stretch of cultivated land and after a curve in the road another outstation of this vast state farm.

A red flag was flying from the pole, signifying that somebody had overfulfilled a quota. Beyond the station the prairies stretched on and on towards a faraway blur of low mountains.

The station was the centre for brigades of schoolchildren. A teenager in gym-tights ran across the lawn carrying a bucket, and an off-duty group in track suits were tossing a volleyball.

The manager was a lean and gaunt man in a cap and a navy-blue suit, who welcomed us on a neat lawn that surrounded the station building. Here the youngsters had part of their specialisation training, learning everything about combine harvesters, tractor mechanics and general farming as part of their usual school curriculum. Also they specialised in ducks–last year they had raised 43,000 ducks.

Usually the farm brigades are divided into field units; there was a unit for poultry, one for experimental agriculture, one for gardening. The lean man broke off his chat to admonish one of our party for dropping a cigarette butt on his nicely trimmed lawn. The brigade of youngsters, he continued pridefully, was the best in the region and for some time had been the best in the whole Republic. He sounded very pleased with his charges. Of course, the quotas of the schoolgoers were set 30 per cent lower than those of adults, but the majority of them worked so hard that they often surpassed the adults. They had dedicated all their work to the local war victims.

At the end of their course they held the 'harvest festival' when the diplomas were handed out along with the praise for the quotas fulfilled and the prizes. There were sports events and all the farm 'gentry' turned up for the festival.

In the meantime, there was a lake nearby where they went swimming or boating when off duty, and there were cultural exchanges with brigades, entertaining each other with amateur theatricals.

In a rest room girls were listening to a favourite Soviet pop singer on a record player and in another room the TV was showing a serialised version, almost appropriately, of Sholokhov's *Virgin Soil Upturned.*

'Have you made up your mind what you are going to become after you finish the tenth class?' I asked one of the girls who was named Sveta.

'I haven't decided yet,' she said. She was the leader of the brigade's Komsomol group. They all looked very young, being in the ninth grade, and serious in spite of their bright smiles.

There was a wall newspaper called *Komsomol Searchlight* with cartoons lampooning errors and carelessness, and safety regulations alongside verses and news items of work progress.

Outside the volleyball game was in progress. The gaunt manager and the lady instructors (or were they chaperones?) said good-bye to us and we drove off across the grasslands. We went down to the lakeside strolling through the forest to look at the new Pioneer camp that was due to be opened soon. The sun came through the trees and glinted on the surface of the lake like speckled glass.

After that we drove back to the farm village and I was surprised to find how near it was: we must have come around in a big circle, along the country road and across a stream and scattering chickens before us. We stopped at one of the houses which was the home of the local secretary, and Murat introduced me to Bakhram Yandosov, a leading technician on the farm, and there was Gennady Skuratov, the director of the poultry farm, and others. From the kitchen came the voices of women and the smell of cooking.

In the dining-room the table had been laid with what looked like everything the state farm could produce. 'Our Kazakh women are very dangerous,' somebody said jovially. 'They are likely to go on the war-path if we don't finish what they have laid out for us.'

'Well, let us appease them,' I said. 'The first toast to the hostess.'

The long drive had given me a feeling of affection for the crowded table. The toasts punctuated the disappearing lines of fare. Amangeldeh was tearing a whole sheep into chunks with his bare hands and sharing it out. We drank to all the usual things and then somebody proposed a toast to the memory of Bram Fischer of South Africa.

'*Rakhmat*,' I said, 'thank you very much,' using the Kazakh word.

The feasting continued in the usual Soviet farm abundance.

The Blue Mountains

We lived in this holiday lodge, a family-size building, above the lakeside surrounded by trees. You could go for a stroll in the woods below our balcony, and beyond the trees was the beach and the lake lay flat and still in the sunlight. There were several lakes in the region, surrounded by the wooded mountains, and this was part of the rest-cure and holiday zone. The forest of birch and pine stretched for miles around and up the mountains with the lakes among them, although perhaps one couldn't really call the mountains mountains but rather high craggy hills and great outcrops of granite in that part of Kazakhstan.

It was very pleasant in the high forestland, and this place was in the Lake Borovoye–Shchuchinsk area–the latter name which I have said is a tongue-twister of pronunciation if you don't speak the language very well or not at all–but it is on the map.

Driving there from Kokchetav you saw the mountains gradually appear in the distance, coming up like a swelling on the horizon.

Amangeldeh or *El Commandante*, as I called him, was saying as we drove towards them: 'There is a legend which

says that when the world was born, God looked down on Kazakhstan and saw the flat empty steppes. He felt sorry for those living in such desolate emptiness, so he took a handful of rocks and tossed it down as a sort of compensation and so we got the Blue Mountains.'

There is an African folk-tale, from Tanzania, I think, which gives another explanation for how mountains came to be. It says that long ago the earth was smooth and flat and even all over, but one day she arose to talk to the sky. When the two of them had finished their chat the earth took leave of the sky and started to return. But she did not reach home all over. Some parts of her became tired on the way and stopped where they were, without completing the descent. Therefore the hills and the mountains.

The mountains did look blue-grey in the distance and one imagined the ancient nomads on their horses and camels peering ahead and naming them after the colour they saw. They are up near the north-east frontier of Kazakhstan and beyond is Siberia, or what is now the southern border of the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic. The ancient people composed many legends and folk-tales about the Blue Mountains, and as we drew near, *El Commandante,* or perhaps it was Murat, pointed out a humped peak. 'That's Burabai,' he said, 'the White Camel. It was a very special camel and stood guard up there, watching and giving warning of any approaching danger. Then one day the youngest son of Ablai Khan, a great chieftain, went out hunting. Perhaps he hadn't been told about the camel, and coming across it he drew his bow and let off an arrow, mortally wounding the animal. The camel sank down bleeding, and finally dying, it turned to stone, so forming the peak you see shaped like a camel.'

Of course, it was not all legends and folk-tales up there. There Kolchak's White Guards had operated during the Civil War, coming down out of Siberia, and battles and skirmishes had been fought among the birches and pines. Now most of the woods and lake region is a nature reserve and holiday area dedicated to the Civil War and the victory of the Reds.

By the time we drove into the town we were dozing in the back of the car, but were suddenly awakened by Amangeldeh's voice up front, saying, *'Dom Kultury'*, and there we were, passing the town's House of Culture on the main street.

We were welcomed at the town centre and the Party headquarters by the First Secretary of the region, a cheerful ovoid fellow with an old-style schoolboy's haircut and the usual smart suit. It was he who brought us to this rather charming holiday lodge by the lake and joined us for lunch. There was really excellent fish straight from the lakes and grilled. The comrade in charge of the house joined us; he was a war veteran and a pensioner. 'I still have many years ahead,' he said. 'I took this job because I didn't feel like retiring.' He allocated us our rooms, including the drivers, and went off because he had another part of the holiday complex to see to, leaving us in charge of the housekeeper. She asked to call her if we needed anything done. The exterior of the lodge was the old-fashioned wood design, but inside everything was very modern. The First Secretary said we should just take things easy, because this was the purpose of this region.

We stayed at the lodge between excursions into the district and for our last few days here in the north. On the balcony Pyotr and Murat tried to teach me a card game called Preference, but it turned out to be too complicated, what with the language or the lack of it, and the score-keeping involved a lay-out chart that looked like a geometrical problem, so I left them to play it and lounged in the sunlight, watching a young couple strolling through the trees by the lake's edge, holding hands in the sunlight. She had wheat-coloured hair and he was a dark Kazakh, and they were walking in the sunlight speckled by the leaves of the trees. At a narrow jetty jutting into the lake a boy was hurling a stick out into the water for his big Alsatian to go in and retrieve.

Squirrels darted up and down the trees, and at night wildcats screeched in the woods. Once I left the light on and the window open, going downstairs, and coming back, found an invasion by thousands of moths. They were all over, against the walls and on the ceiling, in the

bed, on the floor, and nothing we did could get them away. When we got back the next evening the room was clear of them and I always wonder how the housekeeper had managed it.

Of course, there were other things going on besides holidaying at rest-houses and sanatoria among the trees. Near the town itself is also an important forestry centre, a scientific institute full of tree specialists and agronomists, and women in white examining moss and soil through microscopes, and in one room a young lady poring over sheets of computered figures which did not seem to have anything to do with forestry, but did. They were concerned with the preservation of trees, plant diseases and cures, the potential productivity of the woodland. Certainly I knew little about the subject, but the staff presented me with a fine picture of the surrounding lakes and forests and mountains which I still look at now and then. If one has grown up and lived in a big city, it is great to go out into the countryside now and then, although I have always found that a short trip of a few days is enough before I long again for the concrete jungle of the big cities. But really, there in the Blue Mountains it was very pleasant and the picture from the forestry centre reminds me of the idyllic beauty of that place.

'Kumiss' Is Good for You

The health zone covered 65,000 hectares. There was the Shchuchinsk sanatorium we went to look at, especially for miners. We were met at the entranceway by the doctors in charge, and an inmate, a man with a thatch of hair and a stick. He was a patient convalescing, sent by his trade union.

'We treat most heart complaints and tuberculosis,' Doctor Ivan Yankovsky said. 'But, of course, the sanatorium is both for rest and medical purposes.' It is a very modern institution surrounded by walks and parkland. An old man in a cloth cap and leaning on a stick operated the lift that took us up to the seventh floor which opened onto a wide patio-like area exposed to the sky. 'We call it the Seventh Heaven,' Doctor Yankovsky smiled. The purpose

of the open section was for treatment by solar rays, and even in winter patients were treated under the sky in equipment like sleeping bags. From there you could see the mountains and the green forests flung out. '*Ochen krasivo* (very beautiful),' we agreed. The mountains and forests were really a sight to see from the Seventh Heaven.

Below again, in the games room billiard balls smacked and beyond that in the quiet restaurant a worker and his family chatted around a table, and from another an elderly couple with seamed Kazakh faces smiled at us as the nurses entertained us with tea.

This was the sanatorium of the White Meadow, named after the nearby white (or pure) spot where the aforementioned Ablai Khan had camped. On the front terrace Doctor Rosa Ivanovna Ivashchenko, M.Sc., explained about mud baths and solar rays. She was a tall, large-boned woman, exuding confidence, the kind of motherly woman one imagined was meant to be in charge of such an institution. Apart from the normal medical treatment, the mud with its mineral properties, in which the patients wallowed, the sun rays, they also prescribed *kumiss*. 'After all,' she said, 'all medicine is really folk medicine.'

On the terrace a table had been loaded with bottles of the mare's milk for our sampling. It had been specially bottled for medical use, but it was no different really from the *kumiss* you drank in the villages. We were invited to help ourselves, while Dr. Ivashchenko explained the beneficent properties: apparently *kumiss* is rich with Vitamin B_{12} and C, protein and other health-sustaining ingredients.

'It also contains 5 per cent alcohol,' she added.

'Well,' somebody said chuckling, 'you will have to drink many bottles of *kumiss* if you want to get merry.'

Assured of continued good health by samplings of the mare's milk we went on our way. Apart from the ubiquitous *Dom Kultury* there is also an interesting natural history museum where all the wildlife of the area is displayed, and even for the layman, and those who are usually bored by museums, it is something to be seen.

Legends

The road wound through the forest and you could see the segmented water of the lakes through the trees, glinting like scattered shards of mirror. A section of the road was being repaired and a Diesel roller driven by a woman was flattening the steaming macadam. Around a bend we passed a group of forest rangers standing by a *kosyol* parked by a spring. The lady guide with us said: 'Over there is the area for the wild people.'

'Wild people?' I asked with some astonishment.

'Yes, you know those people who spend their holidays in tents and sleeping bags in the woods.'

'Oh,' I laughed. 'You mean *campers.* Wild people, of all things.'

We were shown *Jikebater,* the legendary White Meadow, and the mount of the 'sleeping boy'. If you looked carefully you could see the mountain top forming the shape of a youth lying on his back and the shape of his reclining head. The legend was about a boy who had fought his enemies in the cause of happiness and had been killed by them, dying up there on the mountain where his stone body now lay. The tale was like the one of the camel.

The main lake is Borovoye and is situated in a quite beautiful setting of tree-covered hills and rocky peaks and crags. In fact the entire scene we saw was that of the picture the forestry centre people had given me as a gift. There was the Blue Bay and the Princess Rock rising from the still water, and according to the tale she had been sought after by many suitors and had been offered in marriage to the one who could shoot an arrow to reach the summit of a nearby peak. The lover she favoured but couldn't choose outright turned out to be the strongest bowman, but unfortunately the princess was at the top when he took the winning shot and the arrow killed her, sending her hurtling down into the lake. Anyway, there is an outcrop of rock representing her, and true enough, as you leave the scene slowly and look back the jaggedness of the stone disappears in the distance and you see the clear profile of a young girl with long tresses flowing

back behind her. One can imagine a ballet being produced around a story like that; perhaps it's been done, the Soviets are very enthusiastic about ballet and have a fondness for such legends.

From this one got the impression that the rarity of mountainous regions in Kazakhstan must have stimulated these simple and romantic legends. Indeed, if one wants to study Kazakh folklore seriously one will discover that there is always evidence of mountains running through it.

As a matter of fact, the companion of my travels through Kazakhstan, Murat Auezov, has written about this in his essay, *Kazakh Nomadic Culture,* pointing out among other things: 'The dazzling beauty of the snow-clad peaks has long cast its spell on the Kazakh. "A maiden's breast" is his description of two mountains rising side by side, and he calls a mountain pass caressingly "bell" or "waist". A symbol of beauty, a mountain is also a symbol of strength. In praising a child they say: "May you be like a mountain!" Among their other obligatory feats, the heroes of Kazakh epics were to "cross the seven ranges". Characteristically, most of the legends about the origin of the Kazakhs mention some mountain or others, mostly the Altai, as their original home.'

. . .And Beyond

After we had dinner at the restaurant at the centre, the chairman called in the farm's pop group, a trio of two guitars and an accordion, and told the kitchen staff to shed their aprons and join the farewell party. There were some other lady officials and very soon a fast dance was going, a selection of both folk and modern. Afterwards when everyone was breathless from the whirling and stamping Russian and Kazakh dances, I borrowed one of the guitars and taught everybody to sing *We Shall Overcome* and a few other items from my hoarse repertoire. It was a gay ending to our exploration of the Blue Mountains, of Kazakhstan.

We had driven out to Stepnyak, which was a town some distance from Shchuchinsk, to see the great plains again

for the last time, driving along a country road beyond the lakes. Stepnyak had been a gold-mining town back in the 1930s, but was now a centre of the northern ranching and sheep-raising.

The lakes and mountains were behind us now and the steppelands took their place again, and there, out of a dip in the undulating plains, the farming centre rose suddenly, big enough to be called a small town, really, and founded only in 1954. There were the houses and the picket fences, ducks waddling in the yards, the youngsters on bicycles, and the main square with the slogans and the portraits of award-winning farmers, past and present, and of V. I. Lenin and L. I. Brezhnev, the *Dom Kultury* and the administrative offices where the state farm director waited with the head of the local trade unions and the deputy director.

This was the state farm named after Nikolai Shchors, a legendary military chief who had fought in the Ukraine during the Civil War. The farm had been originally begun by Red Army soldiers and now had a population of about 2,000 composed of nineteen nationalities. They had 650 schoolchildren and seventy in kindergarten, and a boarding school for those whose parents worked far away; there was a hospital with thirty beds as well as the clinic.

We went down to the kindergarten and when the teacher opened a door, there was a smiling crowd of nippers, little girls with big bows in their hair and boys with chubby faces, a mixture of blonde and brunette, who let out a united chorus of, '*Zdravstvuyte*! Welcome!' But in the reception room we found also a lonely little citizen looking very glum and lost, being placated by one of the staff.

'It's his first day,' she smiled, ruffling his hair. 'He is feeling a little strange.'

On a wall hung a portrait of Lenin as a child.

At the hospital we looked around the clinic and out of a room came a young woman whose white uniform did nothing to deny her glamour.

'This is our dentist,' beamed the director.

I smiled, 'Well, I wouldn't mind having a tooth pulled by *her*.'

She smiled back. 'Come on into the surgery, Comrade, and I'll oblige.'

'As soon as I have a toothache,' I assured her.

At the school a group of teenagers of the seventh grade were standing around waiting to hear their chemistry results. The headmistress guided us around the school, showing us laboratories and discussion rooms, explaining methods of teaching, that the teachers all met together to plan the programmes and systems. The aim, she said, was to encourage the communist attitude in the younger generation, apart from giving them an academic education. They held special sessions on political subjects, discussions on political science and history, national and international events.

Later on we stopped at a house on Gagarin Street. It was an ordinary cottage with a dooryard surrounded by a wooden fence. Harnesses hung here and there. We were welcomed inside by a middle-aged Kazakh woman who showed us into the living-room where there were carpets on the floor, a TV set and a lot of traditional Kazakh handwork. A plaited riding-crop lay on the sideboard.

A young man came in to help his mother bring a great bowl of *kumiss* and the little round cups to the table in the middle of the room. The director chuckled jokingly, 'It is expected that the guest should finish one big bowl all by himself.'

'It would probably finish the guest,' I said.

We all sat around and dipped into the big bowl of mare's milk with the small earless cups, drinking. *Kumiss* has a slightly soapy taste, although it is altogether palatable, just a little stranger than the cow's milk, because of the hint of soapiness going down, and has a more watery texture. When the first bowl had been emptied, the young man brought another.

'By the way,' the director said, 'you know the elections for the Supreme Soviet are due soon. Well, our young comrade here is the town candidate for the election.'

His name was Dauletbek Yesinov and he was a handsome young man with shiny, jet-black hair swept back from an olive-skinned face, and he was an ordinary horse

herdsman. He smiled shyly as we congratulated him and I said: 'Your mother must be proud of you.'

Back in the cars and we bumped out of the farm centre, heading towards the steppes beyond. The plains were broken here and there by salt pans and dotted with yellow prairie flowers. We drove along a rough track and the sky was far-flung wide and flat blue, with puff-balls of cloud drifting across it, and far away we could see the dust raised by the herds of horses as they moved along the horizon.

4. The Golden Road

The sunlight lay hot and yellow on the boulevards, in the parks; the windows gleamed and flashed like hundreds of semaphore signals. The sun hung like a smear of brass in the sky and Tashkent quivered in the heat haze.

The city lies in the east of the Uzbek Soviet Socialist Republic, near the edge of a thumb of territory that is part of a hand clasped on the north and south by the smaller republic of Kirghizia. North across the border in Kazakhstan lies Chimkent and due south is Leninabad on a spit of land which is Tajik territory. On the map all these make up what looks like parts of a jig-saw puzzle fitting together to form the Soviet Union's southernmost states.

Here had been the scene of many actions to establish revolutionary Turkestan. Until the October uprising in Petrograd, Bolsheviks and Mensheviks in Turkestan remained united in a single organisation. The Bolsheviks were backed by more than 100,000 'labour front' workers, people of all nationalities who had been mobilised during World War I to work in Russia and who had found themselves caught up in the sweep of revolution. Returning home they became active in the local struggle for socialism.

In the struggle for the power of the Soviets, an exceptionally important role too was played by the garrison soldiers of Tashkent, Samarkand, Ashkhabad, Alma Ata (Verny) and Frunze (Pishpek). By the autumn of 1917 most of them had already sided with the Bolsheviks.

Tashkent became the centre of revolutionary struggle in Central Asia.

On the night of October 27, 1917, workers and soldiers of Tashkent, in response to the call of the Bolsheviks, launched an armed uprising, engaging counter-revolutionary elements led by General Korovichenko commanding Cossacks and Cadets. The territorial Soviets under Men-

sheviks and Socialist-Revolutionaries decided for the Turkestan Committee of the Provisional Government against the revolutionaries. The latter forces in Tashkent consisted of armed workers and soldiers of the 1st and 2nd Siberian regiments and various small army units. At first the counter-revolutionary force was superior in numbers, but the insurgents rapidly gained reinforcements. One after the other major centres in the old Turkestan decided to recognise Soviet power and to help Tashkent fight the counter-revolution.

Fighting in the city broke out on October 28 and lasted four days. Uzbeks, Tajiks and Turkmens fought side by side with Russian workers and soldiers. Young people acted as scouts, women helped erect barricades, carried ammunition and worked as nurses for the Red detachments. In the morning of November 1 the military citadel was captured along with other positions in the city. General Korovichenko was arrested along with officers and the reactionary Turkestan committee, while soldiers considered to have been misled by them were disarmed. Tashkent became Soviet.

Inspired by foreign interventionists and local reactionaries the counter-revolution continued to instigate mutinies, and in the latter half of February 1918, Red Guard units from Tashkent with the assistance of surrounding workers and peasants routed the so-called Kokand Autonomous Government. Fighting went on throughout the territory and by spring 1918 Soviet power had been established in the whole of Central Asia and Kazakhstan with the exception of the Khiva Khanate and the Bukhara Emirate where the feudal lords and *bais* remained in power until 1920.

In the villages of Central Asia Soviet power was established at a much slower pace than in the Russian countryside, due to the strong influence of the *bais* and the Moslem religious leaders and the patriarchal and feudal order prevailing there. But the victory of Soviet power and the resultant national emancipation of the peoples enabled them to reach statehood. The entire people began to take an active part in the building of a new, socialist society.

Orchestras and Conductors

The evening before, soon after we arrived in Tashkent, we went to a birthday celebration for Uigun, who is a famous writer in Uzbekistan, and well known in the Soviet Union for that matter. He had turned seventy and after the speeches of congratulation we were invited to a *malenki banket* (a small banquet) in his honour, by my old friend Kamil Yashen who is also famous in the USSR writers' world, and is what the Anglos would call 'a grand old man' to the Uzbeks.

The *malenki banket* was very pleasant and in fact turned out very merry when the folk musical ensemble started up with their *tuars* and *doiras* to make that wild and exciting music you hear all over Central Asia. A *tuar* is a two-stringed instrument like the Kazakh *dombra*, and the *doira* is a large hand drum, like an oversized tambourine. Most people associate the Soviet Union with the balalaika which is something else altogether and is really Russian. Once I went to a concert by an orchestra consisting entirely of Kazakh *dombras*, and they played an entire symphony, which is indeed something to hear.

Talking of symphonies, while in Tashkent we also went to another orchestral concert which was conducted by Madame Abdurakhmanova who was the one and only female conductor of a symphony orchestra I had ever seen, from which the question arose afterwards on why there are so few women in the world *conducting* orchestras. Of course, there are musicians and opera singers and dancers, but outside the Soviet Union, and only once there, I haven't seen a symphony orchestra conducted by a woman.

So, here we were in the hot sunlight of Tashkent. If you are a city dweller and long, after a while, for the caress of concrete when you have seen and felt the great open spaces, she is a welcome, like an Eastern beauty clad in the swirl of traditional skirts of stone: a pause after the great steppes, the rambling, reluctantly harnessed wildness of the desert, and the far mountain ranges unchanged and defiant.

In many places the old robes of Tashkent have taken on

a new sheen. The concrete expanses of her newly constructed boulevards, the flagstoned walks, the futuristic bodies clad in Uzbek motif; the cubic building on stilts of Moorish arches which is the Lenin Museum; the vast new hotel in which we lived was a curved rectangle, its entire front draped in Koranic concrete lacework; the Palace of Arts, a circular drum of fluted stone balanced precariously, as if pirouetting on slanting columns; the main publishing house rising like a giant pencil poised to scribble on the sky.

This was the new Tashkent. The earthquake of 1966 had wreaked havoc with the old, tearing away her old finery and leaving seventy-five thousand families without homes. Luckily, the loss of life was minimal, but the city was reduced to shambles: more than twenty million square feet of living space was reduced to ruins, as well as scientific, medical and trade enterprises.

Such is the Soviet Union that every region of the country came to the rescue of Tashkent, to build it anew. There was no private enterprise to count the cost, no charitable collection boxes depending on the kindliness of odd citizens. The entire USSR rallied to raise and rebuild the heart of Uzbekistan. So, the friendship of the various republics and the peoples of various nationalities was demonstrated in deeds of solidarity and family duty. Trucks and trainloads of building material, machinery, primary goods converged on the region: from Kiev, Moscow, Leningrad, Minsk and the Baltic republics. From all corners came town-planners and seismologists, gathering to design a new capital.

Buildings were constructed with an eye for protection from future earthquakes. By the autumn of 1966 all of the seventy-five thousand families had moved to new housing blocks, new apartments built away from the epicentre on the outskirts, leaving the centre to administration in the main. Driving through the new suburbs that are neatly laid out and combine modern lines with the traditional Asiatic, you can read the inscriptions on the walls: 'This block was donated and built by the workers of Byelorussia, the Ukraine, Georgia, etc.', in short by the whole of the USSR.

Zulfiya, who looks more like somebody's mother than a national poetess, says: 'The name of Tashkent's builder is Friendship.'

Perhaps that which makes Tashkent so unique, so passionate is the drama of its rebirth. From the belching womb of the earth the midwives of Soviet enterprise had delivered a beautiful child: a maiden growing up beautiful and touchable, whose warm skin you wanted to stroke and feel its reality.

It could be the sun. The sun turned the city into the honey colour of dusky skin. It lay yellow on the broad avenues, along the side-walks, softening the concrete. It forced its way into the fine parks and gilded the windows of government buildings and administration centres, flowed along viaducts and modern underpasses. It was as if one could touch the sunlight, finger it here, there peel it away like shavings of gold leaf from the stone.

The temperature was 35 degrees centigrade. The heat came down heavily, but everybody seemed to accept it, there was no hurry for the shade of the buildings. All oblivious to the sun, men in loose shirts and *tyubeteikas* stood in the sunlight and chatted, others went by lugging the ubiquitous briefcases; summer suits mingled with the multicoloured striped traditional design of Uzbek dresses.

They were also thinking of putting the sun to use. In Tashkent the planners contemplated harnessing its heat for future hot water supplies for the blocks of flats and air-conditioning plants.

Across the street from the modern hotel with its Asiatic façade, a stall on the side-walk was selling *shashlik* in the old-fashioned way, the chunks of meat broiling on skewers over open braziers, while the customers sat at a table or walked on, eating the smoking meat.

I met old friends: Yashen and Babajan, also a top man in the Uzbek Writers Union, a Comrade Volkov, my wife and I had met while holidaying by the Black Sea, others came in and shook hands and people I hadn't met before said, '*Salaam aleikum*'.

'*Aleikum salaam*,' I replied, a little to their surprise. But Africa is a multilingual continent and in Cape Town the Moslem community use Arabic words and phrases

from the Koran although they do not speak Arabic as a language of communication.

We were in Babajan's office and talking about my forthcoming exploration of Uzbekistan, while we drank bottles of mineral water to quench our thirst. From outside the window the smell of the *shashlik* wafted in on the yellow sunlight.

'Well, we are glad to see you again,' Ramz was saying. He is a burly man with a lot of curly hair beginning to grey around his face and, like most everybody else, was in shirt-sleeves. 'As they say in Karakalpakia, a coat is best when it is new, but an old friend is better as he becomes older.' Another proverb. Perhaps they were outdoing the Kazakhs; but in this part of the world one met this flowery language all the time.

I said: 'This reminds me, I have Karakalpakia on my programme.'

Those in the room discussed it, talking in Uzbek and Russian and consulted with young Alisher who had been appointed a guide.

'It's too hot out there,' they decided at last. 'We would not advise you to go. You would not stand the heat, it's worse than here in Tashkent. Go down to Ferghana, it is cooler and more pleasant this time of the year.' I wondered whether it could be hotter than Dar es Salaam or Bamako.

'As long as I got to Bukhara too,' I said, 'I can leave Karakalpakia for another time.'

'It's settled then. Alisher will see to everything you need. Tonight we'll eat, we'll have *plov*,* *da*?'

'Great. *Plov* is just great. But let me get some cooler shirts first.'

I bought some cotton shirts in a big air-conditioned department store that milled with people. There were products from all other parts of the USSR as well as local, and those imported from the other socialist countries. We ate ice-cream to keep cool and on the side-walk I watched an elderly woman in charge of a scale, taking the weights

* *Plov*–the local name for *pilaf*, the popular Eastern dish of rice and mutton, dried or cooked fruit, nuts and vegetables.–*Ed.*

of figure-conscious citizens. All day the heat sweltered and the city shimmered like a dancing girl in the haze of the afternoon.

Long before the earthquake, Tashkent had risen again and again from calamity. It had been pillaged and razed several times in a more war-like age, more times than it had changed names. It had been Chachkent, Binkent, until the 11th century when it took its present name.

Now one had to look close to see the original medieval past. But its Asiatic character had been in the minds of modern architects who incorporated the national Uzbek features. A visitor might think that some of the names did not belong, as if they had become lost somehow in the teeming bazaars of history; the avenues and boulevards of Pushkin, Karl Marx, Gogol being nudged and jostled by the Oriental shoulders of the Navoi, Shota Rustaveli, Khamza. But the revolutionaries of the old Turkestan had fought alongside Russian Red Guards for socialism.

Gardeners were in the park, urging greenery from the hot ochre earth, and we wandered among the shrubbery, the trees and flower beds. A young girl with long black hair in several braids, wearing a multicoloured striped national dress and carrying a violin case, went by. A man in an orange shirt dozed on a bench. The memorial for the war dead of Tashkent rose in an arrangement of tall slabs with the names of each raised in bas-relief, row upon row names spelled out in stone, not to be forgotten. One was reminded of the lines of Pablo Neruda: 'Soviet Union, if we could gather up all the blood spilled in your struggles . . . we would have a new ocean.'

While we walked around the memorial, a bridal procession approached, the bride in all her white finery, followed by an entourage of attendants. Together she and her new husband laid their ribboned bouquet at the foot of the monument.

Then the sun was turning the sky the colour of lilac over the west in the direction of the Aral Sea and where the Caspian Sea washed against the furthest border of Kazakhstan. In Tashkent the buildings dropped their shadows into the streets, onto the broad paved walks and

parks, ushering the golden sunlight out for the night, to let the dusk slip in with its cool relief.

The Uzbek Academy of Sciences and the Literary Museum with its gigantic murals of stone and mosaic formed a silhouette above the lower buildings; the last students were leaving the Polytechnical Institute for the day, Rossiya Hotel hovered in wait for its first supper guests, but on the streets where the open-air eating places worked under awnings or on the side-walks, the smoke from the *shashlik* skewers still mingled with the gathering twilight, and groups gathered to drink beer and wash away the last heat of the day in the city, before heading for the trolleybuses that would take them to the treelined '*sputnik* towns'.

We strolled among the trees that flanked the quiet walks around one of the memorials and the evening was quiet, the park seemingly deserted. A stream gurgled in the moonlight and far away the stars lay like strewn jewels.

'This is where the young couples stroll,' Ramz Babajan said. 'Of course, everybody is safe in our park at night.' The trees rustled along the flagged pathways, fountains tinkled. 'We are a very respectful people,' he added and hummed and hawed with a touch of embarrassment. 'Besides,' he joked, pointing at a rectangular building looming against the moonglow, 'there is the Central Committee keeping an eye on things.'

'That and the stars maybe,' I laughed. 'The stars watch like eyes.'

'You think perhaps they're watching you?'

'Well,' I smiled. 'Stars were first made in South Africa, you know.' I told him that South African tale of the young African girl who sat warming herself by a wood fire one night and played with the ashes, taking them in her hands and flinging them up to see how pretty they were when they floated in the air. As they floated away she put more wood on the fire and stirred it with a stick and the bright sparks flew everywhere and wafted high into the night. They hung in the air and made a bright road across the sky, a road of silver and diamonds.

'It's still there,' I said. 'They call it the Stars Road or

the Milky Way, a road of stars in the darkness.' I added: 'Anyway, if we invented the stars, it must have been your people who invented the sun. It's been really powerful today.'

Between Two Rivers

The broad arm of desert and fertility which is Uzbekistan thrusts more or less into the middle of the Asian part of the USSR, and scattered over its area of 173,750 square miles live some sixty various nationalities and ethnic groups, with an Uzbek majority of about nine million. In the USSR the Uzbeks are the third largest national population. Roughly thrusting apart the two great rivers, the Amu Darya below and the Syr Darya above, Southern Kazakhstan rests upon it while its wrist and hand is held on all sides by the other Union republics of Kirghizia, Tajikistan, Turkmenia. Farther in the south, the distant mountains of the Hindu Kush form a rampart beyond which rises Afghanistan.

Scratching under the surface of the desert, archeologists found the remains of a primitive encampment dating back a hundred thousand years. The bones of Neanderthal man and rock paintings were dug up in the south, the remains of people who roamed the coarse, gravelly, brown earth long before the states of Khorezm, Sogdiana and Bactria arose as the oldest states on the territory.

Here the armies of Cyrus the Great who had founded the Persian Empire penetrated in the 6th century B.C. After him came Alexander to incorporate a large part of Uzbekistan, and with the downfall of the Macedonian's Empire the region became fair game for numerous Turkic tribes crowding in for the pickings.

There came the White Huns and then the Arabs carrying the green banner of Islam. Khorezm grew and then the myriad hooves of the Tatar-Mongols swept in from the East to raze the states that had grown up, plundering and annihilating. It was a period of chaos and fire: mountains of skulls, and the walls of flame glowed on the horizons as the standards of the conqueror's went forward.

Like its neighbouring states Uzbekistan inevitably came under the political and economic influence of Russia, with the same results. Travelling through the region in the 19th century, the European scholar Vambery reported that he had not come across a house in the whole of Central Asia which did not include a Russian article of some kind.

The Russians were interested particularly in raw cotton for their own industries. The tsarist authorities, of course, saw no difference of culture and tradition; as far as they were concerned, the whole of Central Asia was referred to as Turkestan. Back in 1920, it was Lenin's viewpoint that it was necessary to organise national states on the territory of Turkestan. Whereas previously the Uzbeks had been scattered over that vast territory, they were enabled to unite in a single national state in October 1924. National oppression was eliminated and freedom was brought to all minorities.

Lenin was firmly convinced that in Central Asia Soviet power was to take an examination of all the peoples of the East, to prove and demonstrate in deeds and not in words that under that power and with the fraternal support of the victorious working class of Russia the peoples of Central Asia could advance from feudalism to socialism, bypassing capitalism.

The national demarcation of Central Asia was also important in eliminating the consequences of the tsarist colonial regime which sowed discord among the peoples. The national demarcation of Central Asia reunited the peoples within the multinational Soviet state and opened the way for the rapid development of their economy and national culture, imparting the latter with socialist content.

Uzbekistan has a highly developed socialist industry. This includes a large-scale power industry and advanced engineering, chemical, non-ferrous metallurgical, gas, oil, coal and steel industries. Today it holds first place among the other republics in the manufacture of machinery for cotton growing and ginning, in the manufacture of cotton fabrics, mineral fertilisers, silk and vegetable oil. Tashkent itself boasts more than three hundred large plants and factories.

In the war years the Uzbeks demonstrated their solidarity and comradely allegiance with the rest of the USSR. *'Your people are children of the Soviet Union,'* Uzbek workers wrote in a collective letter to their people at the front. *'Together with you the Russian, Ukrainian, Byelorussian, Azerbaijanian, Georgian, Armenian, Tajik, Kazakh, Turkmen and Kirghiz built our great home, our country and our culture, working day and night for 25 years. Your street begins in Byelorussia and the Ukrainian's home is in your country. The Union of Soviet Socialist Republics is a fortress with a gate and the robber who has stolen through this gate is making an attempt on your life! If all Soviet peoples fight shoulder to shoulder, the enemy will be defeated.'*

Half a century has elapsed since the formation of the Uzbek Soviet Socialist Republic. During this relatively short period of history great social and economic transformations have taken place in the life of the Uzbek people. Among other things, in the course of liquidating feudal and patriarchal relations, great difficulties were overcome in the solution of the problem of nationalities, in relations between workers and peasants and in the liquidation of the economic, political and cultural backwardness of the territory. These tasks could be solved through the development of Soviet statehood in such a form which corresponded to the national everyday life features of the peoples of Central Asia, through the isolation of all exploiter elements and the participation of the working people in building up socialism, through the creation of the economic basis of a new social system by means of eliminating private ownership of means of production and development of a national culture.

The Uzbek Pearl

As the little AN-24 circled the city, the Tashselmash and Uzbekselmash factories which manufactured farm machinery, the Tashtekstilmash textile-machine factory, dropped away as Tashkent receded. These giant plants had displaced the old artisan workshops, just as the broad

boulevards had taken the place of the labyrinth of lanes and the old-fashioned mud huts.

The University of Uzbekistan, the *alma mater* of Central Asia, with its fifteen thousand students of ninety-six nationalities and eight hundred foreigners, dwindled below, with its vast libraries and underground stocks of books. The foreign students were mostly Vietnamese and Latin Americans. The courses covered Oriental studies, journalism, philology, history, Germanic studies, biology, chemistry and physics, jurisprudence, applied mathematics, geology and cybernetics. I recalled a group of students politely vacating a lift so we could use it when we visited the University and one of the deputies showed us around and afterwards presented me with a history of the University.

Through a porthole the Chirchik Valley stretched out with the city in its hollow, and beyond the transparent disc made by a propeller, the distant peaks of the Chatkal mountains were visible.

It took about an hour to fly from Tashkent to Ferghana. Ferghana is the central town of the valley which has the same name. It's near the tip of the hand that is held by Kirghizia on the map. It lies in that spur of territory, surrounded by the rugged Alai, which is a part of the Tien Shan range, rising twenty thousand feet in black ominous peaks.

The little plane left us at the airport a short distance from the small provincial-looking town with criss-crossing streets and irrigation canals, a quiet atmosphere, but the flags and hoardings of Uzbekistan's 50th celebrations still in view. We went through the square named after Nurgan, the first Uzbek woman who fought for female rights and was murdered by her brothers for it. We passed a crowd around a car accident. *Chinar*, poplar and plane trees cast shade along the streets. On a side-walk a child was blowing up a toy balloon.

The hotel was plain and austere-looking; one could not imagine it welcoming parties of foreign tourists. In the shadowy foyer a peasant woman and a girl who appeared to be her granddaughter filled in registration forms at a table. I did the same. The form, quaintly translated

into English, was headed 'Leaf of registration' and required 'date of arriving to the hotel' and 'the aim of coming to the USSR'.

A comrade from the Party District Committee named Magrubov and a humorous fellow Adham took us to the deserted restaurant and roused out the cook and waitress so we could all have breakfast.

In spite of its quietness I learned that the population was 160,000 and that one and a half million people lived in the whole district. The Ferghana Valley is called the pearl of Uzbekistan and the whole republic was proud of it, because once it had been all desert, but now it had been turned into one of the greenest and most productive spots. Almost half the entire Uzbek cotton crop and 60 per cent of the silk cocoons come from Ferghana and Andizhan regions. Numerous canals, gouged out of the desert literally with bare hands or old mattocks and hoes, had brought life to these parts where farming is based entirely on irrigation.

In 1939, the Great Ferghana Canal–then 100 miles long–had been built in forty-five days by 160 thousand farmers, men and women, from all over Uzbekistan.

A great deal of the enterprise had been urged and initiated by Osman Yusupov, who was the First Secretary of the Uzbek Communist Party. In 1940, the canal was extended into Tajikistan territory, thus crossing the entire valley east to west. In the town one was surprised to find tall buildings above the trees, colleges, specialised schools and medical institutions. On the outskirts there were an oil refinery and a textile mill.

It is a comparatively young town, less than a hundred years old, but the counter-revolution had swept up and down this valley in the old days until the marauding *basmachi* gangs had been wiped out, and the peasants had sent a message to Lenin, stating: 'The people of Ferghana have chosen the road of communism.'

The Pearl of Uzbekistan, or the 'Sleeping Beauty' was awakened by the kiss of socialist enterprise.

I was fascinated by the *tyubeteika* factory, a sort of living garden of flowers consisting of tables at which scores of young girls in colourful traditional dresses em-

broidered the little skull-caps with nimble fingers that wielded the brightly coloured silk threads. Besides the skull-caps they produced traditional robes and jackets. The whole work-room was ablaze with colours as the dark-haired smiling faces bent intently as they worked at an art that had been handed down for centuries.

We went in two cars heading out of town into the countryside. On the edge of the town a forest of steel pylons and electric cables sprawled under a tower of orange-coloured smoke from the fertiliser plant. After that the roadside was lined with stunted mulberry trees, trunks and heavy branches especially cut down to encourage the greenery on which the silk worms fed. Women in the usual brightly striped dresses worked in the cultivated fields. The road wound into the hills of desert, beige and brown in the hot golden sunlight. An old man in the robes and big turban out of an Eastern fairy-tale went by on a diminutive donkey. On all sides the gravelly desert was sewn with scattered green patches. Then here and there big strange figures resembling iron pterodactyls peck-pecked into huge holes in the brown surface; they were the pumps sucking oil from the wells below. Uzbekistan is an important oil-producing area.

At a crossroads we stopped for a drink of water. The desert undulated in the haze, yet there were green patches on the slopes now and a girl in a headscarf and the usual multicoloured dress searched for weeds. We went on and now the desert was cut away by bright stretches of green. Appearing on the roadside were trees, a mud wall, a donkey cart that drew aside for us, cottages on the slopes above the narrow road that became a macadamed street.

It was Chimjan Village, and we turned through a gateway into a wide courtyard enclosed by a wall, shaded by poplar trees, and surprisingly, lined with clumps of blossoming roses. A couple of men in striped robes and skull-caps led us to a shaded room that had a sofa, chairs, a wardrobe, a desk, and a dusty carpet on the floor. One of the men asked us in Uzbek to wait a while. The shadowy room was a relief after the hot cars and the desert.

After a while a shadow filled the door and a big woman bustled in, booming with laughter of welcome. Whisps

of black hair escaped from under the headscarf, falling about her big, craggily handsome face. She wore a man's coat over her dress and wool stockings on thick legs, a man's shoes. Her voice boomed cheerfully, her teeth flashed in her dark face as she took each of our hands in one of her own big ones.

She was sorry she was late to welcome us. There had been a delay. Perhaps the *tovarishchi* (comrades) would wait a moment longer, while she went off to settle something which would only take a moment. In the meantime we could have some tea. She bawled out and one of the men outside appeared. She gave orders, laughed again and disappeared through an inner door with heavy ease.

I had a feeling I had seen or read of somebody like her somewhere before. She was Inakhon Akhmadalieva, chairman of the Karl Marx Collective Farm; I could not have met her before. I lit a cigarette and smoked, while the man brought the tea tray and I tried to place her. At last I had it. Pilar. She was the guerrilla woman Pilar in Hemingway's *To Whom the Bell Tolls.* The man's coat, the heavy shoes, the booming voice.

But when she came back she had discarded the coat, adjusted the scarf and wore a neat black-and-white dress and high boots.

'Now comrades, I am ready. Let's go somewhere pleasant. I've given everybody their instructions so I'm free.'

We went out to the cars again and she climbed in beside our driver with Larissa, Alisher and me in the back. Before we pulled out she shouted some more instructions to the men in the yard.

She was chatty, talking about the farm. 'How long have I been chairman? Since 1947.' She chuckled and flashed her teeth. 'You see when the war came the men went to the front and left the women to look after things here. When they came back they found us in complete charge. I suppose they were satisfied to leave it that way.'

The farm meeting had elected her leader each year since then. She was fifty-two years old and had three children, two daughters and a son doing higher education.

'Where's your husband?' I asked.

She laughed and said: 'He took a job on another farm, to get away from my directorship, I think. But the farms were combined, so he's back under my thumb.'

We drove out of the village and out of the desert through a big stretch of cottonfields and then up a gravel road through orchards of apricots, cherries, apples and grapes. Everything here had once been part of the desert; now, besides the cotton and fruit, they grew lucerne.

'Water is, of course, a big problem in Uzbekistan, so we have to sacrifice a lot of flower gardening for cotton and other essentials,' the big woman said. But she smiled, 'Still we have a beautiful country.'

We went on up through the orchards and there was no sign of the desert now. Here they had tamed the brutal, searing earth and had placated it with water brought by determination and a belief in what they were doing, and the desert had surrendered, yielding up cotton, silk and pastureland.

'We have eight hundred families and most of the farming is done by the women; the men are mainly concerned with the technical and mechanical side of things. Nine hundred and eighteen workers out of eight hundred families.' She knew her farm, the successes and drawbacks, the amounts gathered at this time and that, and I imagined her directing things with a mixture of heartiness and bluff discipline. It was in the big body, the rugged handsome face, the large firm, but kindly, hands.

The car turned off the road and we stopped at one of these outstations: a house under trees, beds on the veranda, a grape arbour by a pond, a tool shed, a parked jeep. A radio played inside, Uzbek music piping and throbbing. Two men in the quilted robes and sashes came out of the house to greet us, and Inakhon Akhmadalieva told us to make ourselves at home under the arbour.

Very soon the men were carrying bowls and platters laden with dates, cherries, mulberries, walnuts, flat round loaves of bread, cucumbers. We lounged around the table and chatted. Inakhon talked about the farm, wanted to know about Africa, while around us birds twittered in the trees. Inakhon tossed one of the loaves into the pond

and it floated on the water. 'For the fishes,' she said and passed me a bowl of cherries. A big green bullfrog came out of the pond and sat on a floating loaf. He was fat and freckled black, and quaked and croaked; it made everything very rural.

While we were eating cherries, apricots and cracking nuts, the men brought a TV set out of the house and set it up in the arbour so we could watch the programmes. They could get Moscow, Tashkent and Frunze.

While we were eating and talking, another jeep came up and a woman in a smart frock climbed out to join us. She and Inakhon hugged each other. This was the secretary of the Party for that district, Rosa Mamkina.

She sat down at the table with us and I plied her with questions in between talking to the others.

'Yes,' she said to me. 'We have a lot of women in the Party here. Eight hundred odd.'

She had travelled in the West, France, Italy and Greece, and was telling Inakhon Akhmadalieva about women's fashions there. In the meantime, there arrived bowls of *basturma*, a stew of mutton, rice, carrots and other vegetables, and *plov*. It was very pleasant with the orchard trees around and the bullfrog croaking away. They related some humorous anecdotes and told jokes and I tried to do the same, but a joke is never the same translated into another language. Nevertheless, there were no speeches and everything was very informal.

The White Worm

We said good-bye to Inakhon Akhmadalieva. She had to return to the business of farming, but handed us over to Rosa who would play the hostess now. But first I was regaled in the traditional striped robe and sash with great ceremony.

Rosa joined me in the car with Larissa and Alisher, and the others took her jeep, and we drove away, Inakhon and her attendants waving after us in the shade of the orchard.

We left the blossoming greenery of the farmlands and were surrounded by the beige-brown gravelly undula-

tions of the desert again. Then the road climbed and the desert dropped away as the foothills rose before us. Along the road were the grotesque, amputated mulberry trees again and the hills turned greener as we climbed towards the dark bulk of the mountains in the distance.

In the higher country the old-fashioned villages appeared, spread out on each side of the road. There were earthen walls enclosing yards and brown adobe houses behind them. The road wound through one of the villages for a while.

'They are very important villages, in spite of their simplicity,' Rosa said, 'it is here that they breed the silk worms.'

She asked the driver to pull up at one of the brown mud walls. Those in the jeep said they'd continue on and we could catch up, and she led us through the gate into a wide yard with a hard mud floor. She was known by the people living there, of course, and we were all welcomed and somebody immediately said we must have *chai.*

Off the yard was a row of several darkened rooms apart from the main house. I was asked to peer inside. In the gloom were wide platforms carefully piled with greenery which was mulberry leaves. But the piles of green were heaving and writhing as if they were alive; and at first I thought of some eerie and horrid living mass of unearthly life out of a scene from one of those fantasy movies featuring 'blobs' from outer space. My head prickled as if my hair was standing on end, I peered closer and saw that the masses of leaves were infested with thousands of white worms, bloated and somehow repulsive and it was their feeding on the leaves that made each green mass heave and pulse.

'They will eat their fill and soon all the leaves will be gone and they might need more and they will be fed,' a man in rough work clothes explained. He might have been the assistant of some 'Lord of the worms'. Rosa said: 'Afterwards they will spin the thread to enclose themselves in cocoons, threads of silk that will harden and then they will be gathered.'

It all became matter-of-fact again, but I was a little relieved when we were able to partake in some ordinary

chai at a table in the yard, and leave those eerie, heaving and writhing heaps to get on with their work in their shadowy enclosures. It was expensive work too: six of those darkened rooms produced only one box of silk thread.

Further up the village we stopped again and picked up another silk worker. She was Tutiphon Udainazarova, head of a brigade of the Tursunkulov Collective Farm and Hero of Socialist Labour. Beshawled and scarved and chatting volubly she led the way to a big door in a brown wall and we were admitted to another of those baked-earth yards.

On shaded verandas groups of women, young, middle-aged, elderly and old sat around great piles of small white cocoons, they looked a little like silvered groundnuts. These were the final product of the wriggling white worms: the silk thread produced and wound and wrapped solidly about themselves as they had digested the piles of mulberry leaves. The women were removing the outer fluff, sorting the cocoons and filling boxes with them ready for the silk factories.

Mountain Thunder

We dropped Tutiphon off again and continued up the road out of the village and out of the foothills into the high country. Ahead the Alai mountains rose grey-black and streaked with snow. On the side of the road electric pylons were overshadowed by great beige cliffs.

The air was chill in the mountains and far ahead the sky was laden, unlike that of the desert country. Below the road a river ran down the valley from the distant peaks, the water crashing swift and foaming against the boulders. There were settlements on the slopes of the valley and cultivated fields. 'Tobacco,' Rosa explained. All the time the river twisted and turned, wriggling down the mountain through the deep valley, the water sea-green between the rocks.

There were Pioneer holiday camps in the mountains, too, and on the road we passed numbers of young people laden with haversacks and sports equipment.

The mountainsides turned from tan colour to grey rock and green undergrowth as the road twisted and turned upwards. Now and then we saw donkeys by the roadside. Across the valley a woman and a young lad chased lambs who had evaded them; the boy clambered up the side of the valley as a lamb dodged bleating among the shrubs and boulders until it was caught before it reached the road, and he carried it back down the slope, calling out his success to the woman.

The river hissed down the valley and it must have started high up among the peaks of the Alai mountains where the snow melted to swell it into bounding speed.

Now there were lots of young people on the road. They were from the holiday camps and we heard their laughter and shouts, girls with black pigtails and stuffed carrier bags. We rose to 2,000 feet above sea level. Across the valley a huge sign called: 'Glory to the CPSU.'

But higher up it became greyer and ominous for picnicking. Thunder rolled along the dark, snow-streaked mountains and dirty-grey clouds hung with leaden heaviness.

Finally we decided to park in a high meadow. There were people camping in tents here and there and sheep grazing on the slopes. A shepherd came down, wiping his binoculars. My companions were unpacking edibles we had brought from the farm. It was chilly and the spirit warmed us inside while we ate, using the bonnet of the car as a table.

The mountain peaks seemed near enough to touch, black and dappled with snow and very lofty, but it was their huge size that gave the illusion of proximity. We managed to finish a decent meal before the weather closed in and the thunder clapped like artillery before the rain commenced. That was the end of the picnic and we climbed back into the car and the covered jeep. The shepherd retreated into a shelter built in the meadow from where he could watch the flock. Some of the campers were taking down their tents.

The jeep went on ahead, but Rosa asked our driver to stop at a house on the way down the mountainside so we could visit her brother. We drew up at a big gate in the

rain and hooted until somebody came out. He explained that her brother was out in the fields, but such is the usual hospitality that we were not allowed to leave until we had had some collation. The man came back with bowls of refreshment protected from the rain with newspapers and a big parcel of walnuts. We stayed for a while under a shelter in the garden of the house drinking from the bowls and cracking walnuts which were from the trees in the gardens.

Later we said *Aleikum salaam* to our host and went on down the mountain road. There were sections of the mountainside that was red marble used for buildings, and there were little donkeys wandering around.

'It is very healthy up here, although the weather is bad today,' Rosa said. 'People here live to be over a hundred. It has something to do with the good air and abundance of oxygen, I think.'

Further down, the rain passed and the sky was clear again. We stopped at a monument to a local leader killed by *basmachi* gangs during the Civil War and to a Red Guard detachment, which refusing to surrender to fanatical Moslem bands, had died fighting to the death in the house burned down as they resisted.

At a crossroads Rosa wished me well and transferred to the jeep. Our hosts from Ferghana joined us in our car and the party split up, and we drove back towards the town through the dusty golden desert with the water pumps and irrigation ditches criss-crossing it, an oil well here and there, and the late afternoon bringing the first remission from the heat. The sky was purple as we came in sight of the forest of pylons outside Ferghana and the day dwindled away.

A Silken Beauty

Surely, I thought, secretaries of Communist parties do not look like this. They were men in neat suits and a business-like air, looked like directors who presided over board meetings, or political or planning committees, they carried briefcases and welcomed one with polite bonhomie. The women secretaries were as efficient-looking and

looked sturdy and a little plain, competing with the men with their own business-like demeanour.

But she didn't look like a Party secretary, either first, second or third. The gleaming jet-black hair was parted in the middle and piled high behind in a mass that caught the gleam of sunlight from the window in a sheen of polished onyx, complementing the olive-skinned lustre of her face and matching the dark glow of her eyes, under perfect black brows. When she rose from behind her desk one thought of Italian film stars, the striking face and the voice that greeted us reminded me of Rimsky-Korsakov's music for Scheherazade. The black suit she wore might have attempted to give an air of efficiency, but it succeeded only in emphasising the sleek grace of her tall body. To add to everything, an assistant came in and set a sprig of red roses in a vase on her desk—they matched the mobile mouth with which she smiled, flashing white teeth in the dark ivory face. Yet she was top in the Party in the town of Marghilan: Comrade Tyurgunon Erganbertieva.

It is a modern highway that connects Ferghana with Marghilan, which is one of the oldest Uzbek towns, a farming centre since the 10th century and well known for handicraft production. Now the population is about 124 thousand composed of forty nationalities. Before the Revolution only twelve thousand people had lived there. Because it has become one of the big silk textile producers, 52 per cent of the workers were women, although there were 12 other industrial enterprises.

'Lately all the workers worked an extra day to pay for a war memorial,' said Tyurgunon Erganbertieva seriously. 'We had 6,500 killed from this town.' One could not associate her with war, death. But the Soviet Union had lost so many and they wished continually to remind themselves and the world that they wanted peace, to prosper in peace.

She brightened in the lobby of the district Party building as we made our way outside. 'You know, this year, the thirtieth anniversary of the end of the war, we had thirty marriages between people of different nationalities. Our Jewish population, for instance, is only 0.12 per cent

and for the first time there were two Jewish boys and two girls who married partners of other nationalities. So you see, we have been celebrating too, very romantically.'

I did not ask her whether she was married or had a family. We stood in the sunshine and she said, her teeth flashing, 'Our young people are very enthusiastic. Lately we had a parade of twenty thousand Pioneers carrying banners calling for world peace in seven languages of our people. Also we have fifteen thousand Komsomols and 350 work brigades among them. Now, come along and let me show you how we make Uzbekistan's lovely silk material. The national dresses are all silk, you know.'

She was all woman again: dresses, fashions, her form as graceful as a model's, as if she was responsible for advertising Uzbek silk.

Silk manufacturing is an important Soviet state enterprise. The Marghilan silk *kombinat* had been launched in 1926 by decree of the Soviet government and in 1928 the first silk-producing shop had started working. Two more had been evacuated from Moscow in 1941 and as the plant grew it came to employ ten thousand workers of forty different nationalities, 70 per cent of whom are women. The *kombinat* has its own orchards, producing for the works canteens and ten kindergartens attached to it accommodating 2,590 children. It sponsors Pioneer camps, a hospital and a sanatorium; there are evening schools and technical courses for workers desiring further education. The workers participate in special meetings of the management and the Party committee to discuss the planning of production.

Being a special state enterprise must have accounted for the presence of men in the light grey blouses of the militia lounging around the entrance to the plant; identity cards had to be shown by people going in and out through turnstiles. But the regulations were waived for visiting writers accompanied by the beauteous Party official. In an areaway surrounded by the weaving houses we were welcomed by one of the chief engineers. A pair of girls hurried by us from a canteen towards a block nearby, casting curious glances at our group.

Inside the factory the machines hummed and clattered. First there was row on row of machines unravelling the silk thread from the white cocoons. These had to be moistened first to soften them and a factory girl expertly found the end of a thread, attached it to the spindle that rapidly unwound the precious strands. From there to dyeing and then weaving. Everywhere were heads in scarves and intent but smiling faces, both dark curls and blonde ones. Above the clatter and hum sounded the flip-flop of sandals and slippers as the workers hurried about. The work was divided into three eight-hour shifts so the factory never stopped operating.

'We are well ahead with the present five-year plan,' our host explained above the noise of industry. 'In fact, there are some brigades who have already surpassed their quotas, and we even have two weavers who have fulfilled the plan twice over in their section. Here is one of them, Comrade Aisha Abdurakhmanova.' Four other women, two Uzbek sisters and a Tatar and a Ukrainian, were already far ahead into what might be their output for the Eleventh Five-Year Plan.

'We also have a woman weaver who is a deputy of the Supreme Soviet,' he said, grinning proudly.

We went from shop to shop, department to department. Grease-stained men worked at the big weaving or dyeing machines, women smiled at us over the whirling spindles, their coloured headscarves decorating the rows between the machines.

'They're from Italy and Japan,' I said to our guide. 'Some of the machines, I mean.'

'*Da,*' he said. 'We got them because they are less noisy. We try to reduce the noise all the time.'

The average wage of a machinist was 140 rubles a month, he said, but the wages would, most probably, increase with the next five-year plan starting in 1976.

We were given lunch in the sample room, its walls hung with gorgeously coloured material from ceiling to floor: one side pure silk and mixed on the other; national patterns and a variety of others. The factory hosts presented me with a souvenir portrait of Lenin woven in silk.

We had to part with Tyurgunon Erganbertieva at the factory; she had to stay behind to discuss some matter with the directorship or the Party committee. She was all smart efficiency again in her dark suit, but with her grace and sleek dark beauty somehow she belonged where the precious and colourful beauty of silk was produced.

Melons and Movies

The market place of Marghilan teemed with shoppers and the farmers at the stalls in their *tyubeteikas* and striped coats, men and women with dark-skinned faces and tough hands, announced the value and tastiness of their wares in the expected Eastern clapping of many tongues. The fruit of Uzbekistan reminded me of home: the varieties of apples, peaches, the pyramids of pears and quinces; bright yellow or dark purple figs; the mountains of melons. It is said that there are more than one thousand varieties of Uzbek melons: melons with white flesh and others red or green. Some are so fragrant you can smell them a distance away. There are hard and crunchy melons and soft melons; summer melons and winter melons; sweet and mushy melons; melons, melons, melons, reminding me of home. But back home they did not grow on state or collective farms, but on the great farms of the rich landowners and the fruit-canning private enterprise who underpaid their workers.

Once when I told a Soviet farm worker that our own farm workers received the equivalent of about six rubles a month, his jaw dropped in amazement.

'But how does one live on six rubles a month?' he asked staring.

'It was like that in the time of the tsar,' a withered farmer said. 'I remember it, but it is something to surprise you young fellows today.'

From the sunlit market we went over to a Ferghana *kino*, driving past rectangular blocks of flats with their balconies decorated with creepers or hung with bedding.

The sun beat down in the courtyard of the *kino*. A pipe tinkled water into a central pond, but it made no difference to the heat. We sat in the shade of a *chinar* tree and

waited, watching a woman stacking round canisters of film onto a handtrolley. The pipe went on gurgling merrily, mockingly. Somewhere inside a sound-track crackled and disembodied voices came out into the yard.

At last we were hailed inside with profuse apologies for being kept waiting; *chai* was pressed upon us, and bowls of cherries.

Afterwards we were shown rather good documentaries: the construction of the first Ferghana Canal (cries of joy from thousands of voices as the sluice-gates were opened and the water pushed into the desert); a traditional village wedding, all colour and joyous excitement, the wedding couple preceded by horns and beating drums and followed by the rollicking villagers, an atheist ceremony decorated with all the colour of old village life–but the mullah was no more. Then a film of another old and popular tradition involving a competition of wit and repartee. This occasion drew crowds of hundreds into public squares or around rising ground on which sat two men, usually elderly and considered wise. One makes a witty remark about the other to the laughter of the audience, but the opponent is quick with an equally or more so witty reply. So the humorous verbal thrust and parry goes on, the crowd applauding with laughter or groaning if the repartee is not clever enough until one of the competitors fails to answer promptly or more astutely, and the crowd announces him beaten. In old times the crowds were made up of hundreds, but as the film showed, the introduction of the microphone and public address system now draws thousands to these battles of wit and sense of humour.

Pottery, Pipelines and Protein

In the ground floor restaurant of the new tourist hotel two elderly American ladies who spoke Russian were explaining to a waiter how they wanted their eggs done. Except for them and Larissa and me the restaurant was deserted; the tourist parties had already left in the big modern Icarus coaches made in Hungary. Uzbekistan's hot and golden sun beat down on Bukhara. Out-

side the restaurant, other left-over guests, or passersby perhaps, drank coffee or orange squash juice in the snack bar. The hotel was very new and shiny–although the roof-top night spot had not been completely decorated, but was quite usable–and was built near the town where the area had been cleared for development.

When our latest host, Pulad Akhmedov, arrived we first walked over to where they were building the large new war memorial: Bukhara had lost 18,000. There was a plaster cast of what would be the end product of bronze: a gigantic soldier with a tommy gun defending the sun, its rays spreading out behind him. It was going to be a very hefty and symbolically powerful monument. From there we could see, beyond the workmen laying the paving stones, the edge of the town quivering in the haze of heat and the blocks of new flats and the spire of a minaret.

According to archeological investigation, as far back as the 3rd millennium B.C., the population of the lower reaches of the Amu Darya made pottery and built houses for a hundred or a hundred and twenty-five people each. Traces of irrigation canals dating to the end of the 2nd and to the 1st millennium B.C. remain, and the bronze articles, tools and pottery have been found in the Andizhan, Surkhan Darya and Bukhara regions.

Pulad said: 'Now big gas pipelines have been laid from Gazli, a new village near the old city, through the desert all the way to the Urals. It has become part of what we call the Friendship Pipeline that takes gas all the way to socialist countries in Europe nowadays.'

Bukhara Region is the largest in Uzbekistan. It is surrounded by the vast Kyzyl Kum Desert, one of the largest in the world. One recalled the words of Marco Polo: 'When they had crossed this desert, they came to a large and splendid city called Bukhara. The province was also called Bukhara, and its ruler's name was Barak.'

The 1st Congress of the Communist Party of Uzbekistan opened in Bukhara in February 1925 to talk over the task of building socialism in Uzbekistan and the tasks for the state and the legal registration of the newly formed Uzbek SSR. From the very start it had demonstrated its

international character and had in its ranks members of thirty different nationalities.

Ancient Bukhara's ghost still hovered around the great new modern developments that socialist Uzbekistan and the USSR as a whole had brought; around the large-scale construction under way in this sun-scorched exotic place –chemical works where the spikenard and terebinth had been sold in the ancient markets; mineral fertiliser works; cotton mills soon to have a capacity of over a hundred million yards of textiles a year.

Pure protein had been obtained from cotton in Uzbekistan, after failures by several other countries, the light-coloured powder that looks like dry milk highly rated by the Soviet Institute of Food as additives to bread, macaroni, confectionery and other products. Likewise, chemists have worked out the technology that made it possible to obtain protein and medicinal preparation phytin and raffinose from oil cakes, a waste product of cotton.

But all around, the Zeravshan Valley still lies, albeit the caravan trails have long been obliterated, and now in May the sun still carpeted the scorched surrounding desert, leaving no grass, and the farmers waited for the first autumn rain that would start to make the Kyzyl Kum a huge grazing land, and spring to bring out the yellow flowers.

The Hunt of the Sun

Old Bukhara still nudged our shoulders in the narrow streets of the old town with its arches and kiosks and one-room stalls in the thick ancient walls. I bought myself a gaudy sun cap at one of such places on the way as we pushed our way through the bustling streets. Stalls sold modern dresses, metres of material; a street counter sold suitcases and electrical equipment–the prices were the same as those I'd noticed in Tashkent. The ice-cream vendors were doing a brisk trade, especially with women and children: the empty cardboard cartons littered the gutters. In a market street a kiosk dispensed welcome beer to a thirsty crush of males.

'Kholodnoye?' a perspiring young man asked me as I quaffed a tankard. 'Cold?'

'Ne plokhoye,' I told him. 'Not bad.' Soviet beer is by no means the best in the world, but a welcome relief in the Bukhara heat.

Beyond the town, the valley, out in the Kyzyl Kum Desert the shepherds and their sheep were drinking water desalinated by solar power. Solar water fresheners would be used by geologists and others who roamed uninhabited localities. A solar refrigerator for domestic use was being developed and tested by the Bukhara Physics and Technological Institute. The deserts were going to be irrigated by use of solar desalination plants, this would provide a large increase in pastureland and the project was to become part of the five-year plan for solar energy. Experimentation in light-impulsive irradiation in Kazakhstan has raised the humble but popular cucumber yield five times over. Uzbek scientists were irradiating cotton seeds with a mirror concentrator to raise their yield 14 per cent.

The sun was being hunted and harnessed. No longer would the deserts present their awesome visage, no more the thirsty drag from water hole to water hole. The days of plodding caravans had gone now, the excavations of an ancient past stood silent in the sun among the apartment houses, the office blocks, karakul-processing plant; and modern industry had hardened the edges of romance, but could not stop a dream.

The Silent Bells

Now Samarkand is a regional centre also, a great industrial city. Some 40,000 people work at its sixty factories, producing fertilisers, lifts, refrigerators, prefabricated housing units, china and much else.

Still, I had watched the traditional dances performed in the vast doorway of the old Shir-Dor Madrasah in old Registan Square, with its towering portico, domes and towers, decorated with millions of mosaic tiles, rising in all its ancient magnificence.

Ulugbek, the old astronomer, had worked there and an

observatory he had used stood among the old brown plaster medieval walls and mosaic minarets.

This had been the capital of Timur the Lame, or Tamerlane, an oasis town where the red sands of the desert were displaced by the Zeravshan river valley, one of the centres on the old caravan trails.

Away, for we are ready to a man!
Our camels sniff the evening and are glad.
Lead on, O master of the caravan. . . .

Tamerlane the Conqueror, his conquest after conquest expanded his realm to include the entire Persian Empire, and his suzerainty stretched from the Volga to Anatolia in present-day Turkey. He took North India and sacked Delhi, penetrated as far west as Aleppo and Damascus. At the time of his death in 1405 he was beginning a massive campaign against China. During his time Samarkand was beautified and rebuilt, but it is said his cruelty led him to kill or blind the builders and architects brought from all the conquered territories, so they could never repeat the beauty elsewhere.

Elaborate canals carried water from house to house for magnificent flower gardens and orchards. Magnificent mosques, religious colleges and minarets, the remains of which still stand and are being restored, provide a haunting memory of Samarkand's past glory.

We travel not for trafficking alone;
By hotter winds our fiery hearts are fanned:
For lust of knowing what should not be known,
We take the Golden Road to Samarkand.

The Timurid renaissance continued under Tamerlane's grandson, the astute Ulugbek, until an overwhelming Uzbek invasion in 1507 vanquished the dynasty.

So I had looked into the Gur-Emir, Tamerlane's tomb, with its lovely ribbed dome of green tiles. There was the strangely fascinating ruined Bibi-Khanym Mosque with a dome that looks as if it is too big ever to have stood; and the Shakh-i-Zindeh complex of tombs and minarets

all bearing witness to the brief empire of the lame conqueror; all silent now, unresisting to the new invasion of sightseers, and only the ghosts of the colourful past wandering silently among the ruins.

Open the gate, O watchman of the night!
Ho, travellers, I open. For what land
Leave you the dim-moon city of delight?
We take the Golden Road to Samarkand.

In too many of the world's ancient cities, splendour and the picturesque go side by side with poverty and squalor. Not so in Samarkand. Concern for the heritage of the past is coupled with concern for the need to build a new city in which its citizens can work, relax and study at their ease. The master plan up to 1990 includes housing estates of four-to-nine-storey buildings, due consideration being given to the preservation and view of the old and historic parts.

So Flecker's dream characters may still approach the ruined walls of the old city:

Sweet to ride forth at evening from the wells,
When shadows pass gigantic on the sand,
And softly through the silence beat the bells
Along the Golden Road to Samarkand.

The camel bells have fallen silent, drowned by the clatter of the 20th century, and Flecker's ancients might even have looked into the future with curiosity.

A WATCHMAN: *Men are unwise and curiously planned.*

A WOMAN: *They have their dreams, and do not think of us.*

VOICES OF THE CARAVAN (in the distance): *We take the Golden Road to Samarkand.*

But today this modern thriving town stands there with spacious new housing blocks, schools, beautifully laid public gardens that provide relief from the midday heat, wisely created and curiously planned.

Among the Antiquities

Pulad hammered on the vast wooden gates. The Ark citadel, built 1,500 years ago in Bukhara, rose around the gates with all its ponderous and ominous grimness. From here the Emirs of Bukhara had reigned with the liberal use of snake pits and torture-chambers. Executions had taken place weekly before this citadel, usually under the cynical eye of the leader of the Faithful.

The place was now a museum, actually still being restored, but shut for the day. One imagined the Emir ordering everything closed, the executioner given a day off, and the retiring to the harem. But the last Emir had fled to Afghanistan or Persia or some such place after the Civil War, and the man who finally opened the leaves of the great gates was tall, in sandals and shirt-sleeves, and was the historian in charge of the restoration work.

When Pulad explained that I would be in Bukhara only one day more, we were happily allowed in. The historian was glad to show us around–he looked happy in his work and eager to explain its details.

There was a certain chill gloominess about the place in spite of the exquisite mosaic work, the Koranic decorations. We entered reception-rooms, ante-rooms, the throne room; in corners hideous Victorian importations by the Emir stood incongruously by exquisite Oriental mosaic murals. Peacocks still strutted in the gardens and a boy played at the edge of the pool where the wives and concubines had, probably, once splashed noisily.

The historian took us to a room, which contained a lot of modern books on shelves or piled up in the haphazarded manner of researching professors. Probably it was part of his investigatory material for the restoration. Being told my own profession, he began searching through piles of magazines, literary and historical, exclaiming that, perhaps, some of my writing must be there. What would I be doing among the antiquities of Bukhara? But, Weyallah! There I was in the form of a contribution to the *Foreign Literature* magazine. Our historian was delighted; my autograph was demanded; the magazine was immediately displayed in a glass-doored bookcase, auto-

graph and date facing front. One landed up in strange places: perhaps I might even be mistaken for one of the curiosities connected with the Emir, in time to come.

'He came back,' the historian said. 'The Emir, I mean. After everything was over and some years passed, he came back to see what Bukhara looked like.'

It appeared that part of the Ark complex had been turned into a convalescent centre. At tables men in dressing gowns or white uniforms played chess or drank tea, chatted and smoked under an arbour. To one side, a heavy door in an areaway below ground level carried a medical-point sign. Could the torture-chambers once have been down there?

We were invited to tea and chatted for a while, exchanging experiences with the historian and others. The peacocks strutted sedately about the garden. I wondered whether they had been there during the time of the Emir.

We passed under the Char-Minar minarets and went to look at the Kalyan Mosque and the Gakoshan Minaret. This was very high, a slender column towering over the old quarter, and I believe that was the one from the top of which condemned prisoners were hurled to their deaths. The Emirs had been very busy rulers.

Today the population of Bukhara exceeds one hundred thousand, comprised of Uzbeks, Tajiks, Russians and Jews; a community which has built a modern and well-laid-out town side by side with the monuments of the past.

The Black Lake

Uzbekistan is not only famous for silk and cotton. At the local karakul-processing plant in Bukhara we watched rows of workers expertly sorting the pelts, adjudging their quality by a feel of the hand, while the director described the various types according to the texture of the wool.

The word 'karakul' means 'black lake', because the pelts shimmer and ripple glossily like sunlight on water. Much of the 'black lake' comes, a little incongruously per-

haps, from the desert country of the west and north-west of Uzbekistan. But the term 'black lake' has become obsolete now, since sheep have been bred which give pelts of various colours–grey, red, brown or even a beautiful bluish with white spots, and those gold or silver-tipped waves. The white karakul is newest and considered most rare and beautiful. These pelts were obtained by research workers at the Samarkand karakul breeding institute and now there are entire herds of white karakul sheep.

Rubáiyát in a Tea-House

Not far from an ancient tomb lately excavated and centuries old was situated a *chaighana* cum eating place in a courtyard shaded by trees. A small boy dusted the carpets on one of the platforms and we shed our shoes and sat waiting while Pulad went to order. It was cool in the shadow of the trees and men played cards nearby over bowls of tea and skewers of *shashlik;* a couple of older men in *tyubeteikas* conversed quietly, while from the kitchen came the spicy aroma of Asian cooking.

Among the dining platforms strutted a very stately-looking rooster, a colourful chanticleer with proud head and cockscomb, and smooth feathers glistening red and green. He stepped with panache among the human diners, his head cocked disdainfully, like a cavalier swaggering in search of a damsel. He found her in the form of a stout hen and steered her triumphantly in the direction of a more private quarter of the yard.

While I was watching this, Pulad came back from the direction of the kitchen accompanied by three young men whom he introduced to Larissa, Alisher and me. They were students or graduates from some institute or other, and wrote a little, too, they said. We all sat down, cross-legged or sidesaddle on the platform and shared the fare brought by the boy and his sister, who helped after school hours.

We ate and talked about local writing and one of the young men knew the whole of the Rubáiyát of Omar Khayyam by heart in the original Persian–which really was something, I thought. After some urging and cajol-

ing he obliged with a few stanzas, and even without translation I tried to imagine what he might be reciting.

And, as the Cock crew, those who stood before
The Tavern shouted–'Open then the door!
'You know how little while we have to stay,
'And, once departed, may return no more.'

Leave-Taking

Back in my room in the hotel at Tashkent I found a handbill with a photo of the candidate notifying that the elections to the Supreme Soviet were pending. All candidates have free access to newspapers and printing so I supposed this one would not think a copy of his manifesto would be wasted on a voteless foreigner.

It was cooler for a while in Tashkent and wind blew leaves skipping across the streets under a light rain that spattered the asphalt. But afterwards the sun came out again and everything was gilded once more. Outside the hotel a small blonde boy was on the look out for tourists and wanted to trade a lapel badge for chewing gum; I had him carry a parcel up to my room and paid him with a packet of gum, letting him keep his badge for another trade. In the evening you could see the lights of the city from the roof restaurant of the hotel, and the apartment blocks in the distance like illuminated chessboards. There was an American group in the restaurant and a party of Poles, and I bought some champagne for Larissa and myself, because she was off to Moscow the next day and I would be going to Siberia on my own.

Our last visit in Uzbekistan had been to a local collective farm, accompanied by Comrade Khojayev of the Tashkent District Party Committee, a young and good-looking man in the usual smart suit. The director of the Lenin Collective Farm was pleasantly surprised that we had decided to come.

'Why, we are a comparatively small farm,' he said. 'But welcome, welcome.'

There was the inevitable war memorial, a simple arrangement in the central garden that blossomed with

bright flowers; and then he drove us around the village, the houses all gay with flower patches. They had conquered the desert in a small way. The farm was run like all others: one had become used to the accounts of yields of crops, the quotas for the next year. Apart from the collective property, each member of the farm was allowed to have a personal plot for his own family use, a cow and a certain number of calves, sheep and poultry. The farm produced cotton in the main, but they were going in for grapes as well.

Later there had been the usual prodigious lunch out in the open under an arbour. To end it all, I was once more regaled in the striped, multicoloured national robe, sash and *tyubeteika.*

At the Writers Union there was the ceremonial leave-taking, attended by several members of the professional fraternity, including Ramz Babajan and Kamil Yashen, and I was presented with a beautiful Uzbek tea-set. By a miracle it survived my travels and arrived home without even a chip, to remind me of the *chaighanas* of Central Asia, the white worm, the people in their bright colours, the hot sun that lay like gold all over Uzbekistan.

The Trumpet of Spring

Since the time of Lenin's decree on irrigation work, signed even when the country was in ruin and famine rife, and the Civil War still raging, more than two and a half million acres of desert and arid plains in Uzbekistan have been supplied with water. Land reclamation goes on a grand scale. Now nine hundred modern irrigation systems and 55,000 hydrotechnical installations supply water to the Uzbek fields and to what is called the Hungry Steppe. Attempts were made to bring water to this fertile but lifeless plain long before the Revolution, but with little effect. Today, about seven and a half million acres in all are being irrigated–about 20 per cent of the entire irrigated area of the Soviet Union.

In the process a single type of agricultural production was established and consolidated and became the dominating method. The Uzbek peasantry was thus freed from

relations of economic suppression and subjugation which had tormented them for centuries, and which right up to the period of collectivisation existed as vestiges of feudal relations.

The transformation in the class structure of the rural population was manifested not only in the liquidation of economic subjugation, but also in the transformation of hundreds of thousands of small-scale commodity producers. The peasantry developed into the harbingers of new, socialist relations of production. These new relations, similar to those dominating socialist industry, served as a basis for the moral and political unity of the peasantry and the working class, as the economic foundation for the further union between the two friendly classes which comprise the class structure of Uzbekistan, and indeed the other Soviet republics.

New production relations based on socialist property opened broad new prospects for the development of the productive forces in Uzbekistan. Machinery became a major element of agriculture, and mechanisation of farming went hand in hand with the socialist industrialisation of the national economy.

The industrialisation programme made it possible to set up industrial centres in the formerly backward regions and to draw the local population into industrial labour. This had not only economic significance, but also great social impact. This produced a new material basis which eliminated medieval-type methods through the introduction of machinery.

Uzbekistan's industry has now developed into a major branch of the national economy with up-to-date equipment and modern technology. Today Uzbekistan has over 1,400 enterprises in over one hundred branches of industry. During the Soviet period its industrial output has grown 60 times.

Along with the other Soviet republics, Uzbekistan takes part actively in the realisation of important industrial projects in Nepal, Guinea, Tunisia, Kampuchea and other countries. For example, the industrial workers of Uzbekistan contributed to the construction of the Aswan Dam in Egypt by supplying electric cable, excavators and

various electrical engineering appliances.

Perhaps, all this was their Golden Road; one felt it was what Uzbekistan's poetess Zulfiya Israilova meant when she wrote her *Spring Has Come and Asks for You* –socialist Uzbekistan.

And, driving off the winter day,
The Spring her trumpet loudly blew,
And, humming low your favourite lay,
She went abroad to search for you.

5. A Giant of Great Promise

I was heading back the way I had come: the first stop from Tashkent was Alma Ata. The plane was full of people with excess hand luggage; bags, bundles, boxes were all over. The turboprops whined and roared and we lifted off, leaving Tashkent behind in the fading sunlight, a glint of fire from the steel works, a brief vista of brown countryside and then we were aloft; Central Asia dropped away like gold coins in the waning light. A couple beside me unpacked a shopping bag and plied me with tomatoes, indicating that I should share their supper. As if this was a signal, there then came several demands for mineral water, *'pazhalusta'*, from the stewardesses.

Alma Ata Airport was dark except for the glow from the main building. Those who were leaving the plane there disappeared, while an airport hostess took me to a waiting-room where I sat alone with a refrigerator and a glass cabinet displaying literature supplied by the Novosti Press Agency. Apparently, as a lone foreigner I had to be looked after carefully until Irkutsk in Siberia; the Writers Union could not afford to let me get lost on the way.

When I was aboard again I was given another seat, up front, and a stout and elderly lady, who jiggled like disturbed jelly, squeezed herself into the seat next to me. She was very friendly and called me *Meester, Meester* and asked whether I was from Kampuchea. I said, no, South Africa, and she chatted on in Russian most of the way and all I could understand were the words *Vietnamski* and *Amerikanski.* Obviously, it was a commentary on the war and from her expression I gathered she didn't think much of the United States. Some people went to sleep, but my stout neighbour seemed indefatigable and we carried on the one-sided conversation all the way to the stop-over at Novosibirsk.

There I was handed over to a chirpy little member of Aeroflot and guided through the half-silent airport building to an upstairs waiting-room to share it with a young couple in jeans who looked Mongolian and did not speak English. There seemed to be a delay and I read more of the literature the airports supply free of charge. The airport was, obviously, on the tourist circuit, because it was quite new and there was more of the plate-glass-and-plastic fittings than at the smaller internal stops.

We were out of Central Asia now and in the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic, north of the Altai mountains and on the edge of Western Siberia. I realised I would be returning this way, too, sometime; it seemed like a lot of to-ing and fro-ing. What I wanted was to get on the Trans-Siberian Railway back to Moscow. I was tired of aeroplanes, and after all I had heard of the railway I decided one couldn't really write a proper travel book about Russia unless one had been on the Trans-Siberian. One might even get some material for a mystery thriller *à la* Agatha Christie and call it *Murder on the Trans-Siberian Express.*

There was a long wait and the Mongolian-looking couple dozed over their tight-packed shoulder bags and I continued to imagine a journey on the Trans-Siberian Railway. After a while, the airline hostess came to collect us and we trooped sleepily after her to the plane.

'Neither Tree Nor Bread'

For centuries the world knew little about the mysterious land beyond the Urals. All kinds of horrifying fairy-tales circulated about an inhospitable and harsh land. Siberia was the 'Darkest Africa' of the Northern Hemisphere. Medieval Europe received news of it from rare travellers who were generally considered very lucky to have been able to get back from this earthly conception of hell itself, beyond the Ripei Mountains as the Urals were then called. In 1544, the Franciscan monk, Sebastian Münster, published his *Cosmographia universalis* and the part dealing with Siberia abounded with highly imaginative inventions which convinced his readers that

Siberia was a land of eternal night, a desert of snow and ice, inhabited by all manner of monsters such as those having the heads of lions and tails like the devil, while 'nothing but snow is to be found there, neither tree nor bread nor wine'.

Nevertheless, other more reliable sources of information were available. As far back as the 11th century merchants and traders had set out from Novgorod in search of new routes and had returned with more truthful tales to tell of the richness of the inhospitable land, the land called *Sibir* by its inhabitants of nomadic tribes, hunters and cattlemen.

According to the most reliable investigations, the name 'Siberia', in the language of the ancient nomads who roamed the wilderness, meant 'the sleeping land'–*sib*, to sleep, and *ir*–land. In the late 12th century, the territory was overrun by the pillaging hordes of Genghis Khan. The few principalities, which survived that ruthless invasion, banded together to form the Siberian Khanate and repeatedly its war-like rulers raided West against the young Muscovy state. Then in 1552, Russian troops defeated the Tatars and swept away the Kazan Khanate. Afterwards they dealt with the Tatar Khan of Siberia, Kuchum, who had been harassing the frontier of Muscovy. Kuchum's hordes were routed by the Don Cossack chieftain, Yermak, who thus opened the way into Siberia.

After this the Russians streamed into the new territory. Many were escaped serfs, fleeing from bondage, others were adventurers and pioneers in search of new land for cultivation. All these were the *pervoprokhodtsy* (land scouts), the frontiersmen of Siberia. Yet this colonisation did not come up to expectations. There was little development of the latent potentialities of the land. In 1882, three hundred years after Yermak had ended his campaign, it was recorded that many people still looked upon the huge area as an inhospitable desert, that the bias of ignorance still damned the ill-fated land.

Siberia was stuffed with mineral deposits, yet hardware had to come from Central Russia; there was cattle and wool, but cloth had to be fetched from the metropolitan West. The territory was looked upon as a good

market for inferior but costly goods; any serious development there would mean undesirable competition against the manufacturers of Central Russia. Peasants at home were starved for land, yet the tsarist authorities enforced rigid control over emigration. This was done in the interests of the landlords of Central Russia who needed the cheap labour force. But Siberia had to be developed somehow, so the regime sent out convicts for the purpose, peppering the territory with prisons and penal institutions. Political opponents and ordinary law-breakers were sent to Siberia.

While in exile himself in the snow-bound village of Shushenskoye in Krasnoyarsk Region, Lenin gave much thought to the future of Siberia. He became convinced that the territory had tremendous potentialities.

In 1918, even when Russia was in the throes of a great battle for survival, Lenin issued orders for an accurate estimation of coal reserves in the Kuznetsk Basin; he thought ahead to electrification, to iron and steel from Urals ore and West Siberian coal. The October Revolution saved Siberia from the fate of a colony and prevented it from satisfying the appetites of foreign concessionaires. For the USSR the land, once supposedly haunted by fabled monsters, where there was allegedly to be 'neither tree nor bread nor wine', became a mighty power base. For the new socialist generation of *pervoprokhodtsy*, the slogan was, 'Siberia is the land of tomorrow!'

At the Crossroads

When I climbed down from the aircraft after dozing on and off from the Novosibirsk stop-over, there was Georgi from the USSR Writers Union, waiting at the foot of the steps. With him was Albert Gurilyov to represent the Siberian city of Irkutsk. I was sleepy, but the morning was sharp and chill and helped waken me. Albert had sleek hair close against his head and went through the formalities of welcome. I was glad to see Georgi too, and we made our way towards the airport building.

'Albert is a little embarrassed,' Georgi said. 'You see they don't have a car, but a jeep truck and they are

worried that a foreigner living in London might want to travel by car. Well, I told them you're just an ordinary fellow like the rest of us and would not mind.'

I said: 'Thank goodness. I am tired of aeroplanes, I'm tired of shiny motorcars, and the jeep will be a change. Besides, it will help create an atmosphere. I can't write about travelling about in Soviet limousines like some visiting dignitary, can I? Besides I have also been dreaming of the Trans-Siberian Railway.'

That set Albert at ease and he introduced me to the young driver of the jeep truck, Volodya, and we loaded my cases which included a small wooden crate presented at Tashkent Airport by Ramz Babajan. I was under the impression he had said it contained fruit, but when it was eventually opened it contained tomatoes. These I divided between the protesting Albert and Volodya–they expected me to consume the lot myself since it had been a present from somebody, but I insisted that I did not look forward to a diet of tomatoes, especially by the crateful.

Well, we drove into Irkutsk which is an old town whose historical records go back 300 years. It was considered the crossroads between Europe and Asia in the old times and the central point for the collection of the valuable Siberian furs before shipment to the markets or factories. Today, too, Irkutsk is famous for fur pelts of more than 60 species of animals from the territory stretching from the Yenisei River to the Pacific Ocean. In addition to sable, Eastern Siberia sends ermine, lynx, squirrel, silver and red fox, blue and white polar fox, otter and mink, to the fur auctions.

In tsarist times it had been the provincial centre for Eastern Siberia and the seat of government for the latter territory. It is a town of contrasts, with the usual blocks of flats edged up against the old-style buildings and log houses. There were apple blossoms along the streets from Kirov Square, where the Foreign Languages Institute is situated, and the municipal building or local Soviet with its red flag. The population is about half a million now, and besides the Polytechnical Institute there are a Polish Catholic Church, a Russian Orthodox and a synagogue.

We were actually in the area of the Buryats, a people of Mongol extraction.

'Irkutsk is a Buryat word meaning "winding",' Albert explained. 'It refers to the Angara River on which the city is built.'

Behind some nearby hills was the Angara River and a new suburb had grown up there; you could see the upper floors of blocks of flats. All around the city were the new industrial complexes that produced radios and machinery, the aviation works. In pre-revolutionary times, when Cossacks had come upriver by boat, there had been only one wagon-making works. Now Irkutsk's yards ship goods all the way to India, Cuba, Indonesia: machinery, equipment for blast-furnaces and thermoelectric stations, among other intricate items.

Yet here many of the Decembrists of 1825 had been exiled; the original immigrant population had been composed of serfs, exiles and convicts, and the Siberians remember this with some pride, still singing the songs which these ancestors had brought with them.

There was the memorial to the dead of the Patriotic War, of course, stating that two hundred thousand had gone from Irkutsk railway station straight to the front, and less than half the number had returned. It stands in the public gardens which line the embankment of the Angara.

Beyond the city, northward, east and west, lay the vast expanse of Siberia covering a total of ten million square kilometres, extending from the Urals to the Pacific and vaster than Australia.

The Pearl of Siberia

Georgi and I stayed in a big hotel in Irkutsk. Downstairs the long lobby had a chill aspect, but that was because the weather was dull and overcast. Spring had not really arrived yet, although the snow had gone. Most people think of Siberia, as they had in the old times, as a land of impenetrable forests, barren wastes of tundra extending north to the Arctic Ocean—a land of permafrost and, probably, the coldest place on earth. Spring in

Siberia is warm, warm enough for the cherry trees, lilacs and tulips. In summer the heat may rise to thirty degrees centigrade and berries abound like rubies strewn about by some extravagant giant.

There were parties of tourists in the hotel and while we were in the restaurant a waitress painfully remarked that there would be 160 guests for breakfast. Now there were only ourselves, a Japanese couple, who preferred to eat behind a decorative screen, and a party of Germans at a long table. I was introduced to Anatoly Shastin, who was also from the Writers Union, but for the most part he left us in the hands of Albert.

The next day we had breakfast in the hotel's buffet, to relieve the waitresses of two of their expected 160 guests.

Outside, the Intourist groups were boarding their coaches accompanied by choruses of French and German. Volodya was waiting by our more compact *kosyol,* and with Georgi and Albert on the benches in the back and me in the front we set out for Lake Baikal.

We passed the old-style houses on the edge of the city. The settlers from various parts had built their houses with their old national characteristics, so the buildings proved a motley collection. But a lot of new buildings was going on and behind hedges and trees the cranes appeared as giant metal storks, towering over the cleared sites.

The road out passed through great stretches of trees. Irkutsk Region is tremendously rich in wood–sixty million hectares of forests–and all around us and ahead in the distance the forest spread its hues of green under the unfriendly-looking grey sky: trees dark green, light green splattered all over by the white patches of the birch bark.

The road was bumpy and we seemed to be bouncing along for some stretches. Highways seem generally temperamental in Siberia; this, probably, had something to do with the undersoil, the changing temperatures, melting and freezing and expansion and contraction. Due to the enormous distances to cover, the roads in Siberia must also have been built in somewhat of a hurry. There were

small families on motorcycles and sidecars going the same way we were; they all wore crash helmets.

We passed little villages with wooden fences, built in clearings of the forest. It was a sharp contrast to Central Asia: here they cut down greenery, there they struggled to produce it.

On the way we stopped on the road just outside a village by a river bank and Albert got out to collect his wife and little daughter who were holidaying there. We waited at the roadside, walked a little way into the forest. The ground was soggy with mould from fallen leaves. Across the road, in the village, a woman carried two buckets on a yoke–it was something one expected to see in villages, a picture out of a children's story.

Albert returned with the missus, who was a homely-looking and motherly woman, and their daughter who was pridefully presented. Everybody having been distributed as comfortably as possible inside the jeep, we set out again through the forest land. For a while, it was up hill and down dale and past a lonely homestead in a little vale, another village and then the first outposts of Lake Baikal: a built-up street, a restaurant facing a parking lot, and below these the lake itself.

In spite of the bad weather there were hikers about, young girls shrieking with merriment over some obscure clownishness of their companions; a few anglers on a wall over the water and some of the locals working in their gardens.

According to the tourist brochures, 'Lake Baikal, that gem of Siberia, is amazingly beautiful, especially in summer, in an emerald green setting of wooded hills. Fancifully shaped rocks, giant cedars and pines overhanging the water add to the distinctive wild beauty of the lake... the sweet lake water is amazingly pure and clear.' Trees were there, of course, and the 'fancifully shaped rocks', but a chill and heavy mist hid most of the lake, limiting visibility to the most immediate vicinity, and the water looked heavy grey, like dusty pearl.

Nevertheless, Lake Baikal is the deepest on our planet with an average depth of 730 metres and a maximum of 1,620, holding one-fifth of all the fresh water in the world.

Baikal sturgeon is the weightiest, they say, and there are even seals. But now there was an unwelcome look about the water and we walked along the edge of the lake in the chill damp. It felt like the oncome of rain and the sky was the colour of a dirty battleship, yet a big pleasure cruiser was setting out in the distance, a *raketa* (hydrofoil), what some call a hovercraft.

Inevitably there was a legend to recount about the lake. 'You see that 336 rivers flow into the lake and only one, the Angara, flows out of it,' Albert said. We were strolling back the way we had come. 'Well, Angara was the daughter of Baikal and all the other rivers were suitors who came to Baikal to ask for her hand in marriage. But Angara loved only Yenisei and refused to choose any of the others, which angered her father, Baikal. So Angara ran away from home to join her lover Yenisei. Baikal tried to stop her by throwing a great rock, but she got away, because she could run very swiftly.' He pointed to a big outcrop of the lake. 'There, that's the rock he hurled at her. Anyway Angara got away and so joined Yenisei. You see how fast the river flows and further north she meets the Yenisei, the mightiest river in Siberia.'

Returning to more mundane things, Baikal is of key importance to the development of productive forces of the region. A system of giant electric power projects is being raised on the Angara and the Yenisei. As for the lake itself, the dumping of industrial, domestic and other waste is prohibited; sanitary services keep a watch on the processing method and recycling of water used by present enterprises. A new system of fuelling ships is in operation to prevent pollution by fuel, and chemical plant protection on local farmlands is banned, preference is given to biological methods of pest control. All this came after a public outcry when operations ruined the banks of the lake and rivers became fouled so that the omul, the Baikal salmon, could no longer get upstream to spawn. The whole Baikal basin has been designated a nature park and almost 1,250 miles of the lake and river bank cleared.

While we were strolling back, a coach arrived and a crowd of Japanese tourists erupted from it to go trot-

ting off into the surrounding woodland, their Nikon cameras clicking and whirring as they gambolled among the trees like merry children. They did not seem to mind the unholiday weather.

After a while, the mistiness lifted and you could see the far opposite bank hazily, a line of white cliffs, glittering in the distance as if they were still snowbound.

On the way back we stopped at the village where we had collected Albert's family and were entertained with lunch, joined by his mother and mother-in-law, and we were shown the garden where Albert's retired father raised strawberries. While we were looking around, another old villager stopped by, a war veteran on crutches, who shook hands all round, and then some neighbouring housewives joined in and talked about the village which was called *Bolshaya Reka* (Big River). It was a pleasant-looking village, rows of wooden houses and gardens and piled lumber and an atmosphere of old Russia. It lay near the river bank across the road from the *taiga*, great forest of birch and larches that looked impenetrable and forbidding.

Asides in Irkutsk

The weather brightened somewhat and we walked along Kirov Square near the hotel where there were many students from the Institute of Foreign Languages and others, sitting over books on the benches or chatting among themselves. At the other end of the square we emerged on what looked like the start of a motorcycle race, because there were a lot of youths in leather and denim and crash helmets revving their machines, and official-looking men, and strings of gay bunting hung between poles. We really didn't find out what the event was, but the riders made a lot of brave and important-sounding noise with their bikes and looked very flamboyant in the grotesque helmets, like knights about to engage in a tourney.

We went to look at the tombs of those exiled Decembrists who had been buried in Irkutsk during the last cen-

tury. They were in the yard of an old monastery, under apple trees: Trubetskoi and wife and children and others. Apart from the Decembrists there was a memorial to a Shelikhov, who had passed through Irkutsk on his way to Alaska, and a plaque which announced pompously that the memorial had cost 11,760 rubles!

Albert's wife also happened to be the director of Irkutsk's ice-cream factory, and having a childhood weakness for ice-cream, I did not mind accepting an invitation to inspect the plant. One did not really associate feasting on ice-cream with Siberia; the name always conjured up scenes of thick furs and tiled stoves. But there was the plant that produced eight tons of ice-cream per shift. After watching the production process I was made to sit down in a little reception-room and sample varieties of the *morozhenoye*–the only trouble was that the overgenerous hosts produced each sample by the huge bowlful, together with nuts and chocolates. Perhaps, it was a sort of punishment for my childhood overindulgence. In the evening we went to see the film version of Sholokhov's novel of the Patriotic War, *They Fought for Their Country*. They had filmed the parts of the book he'd completed and unfortunately the leading actor died before they could go on with it. They did not mean to show the war on a broad panoramic scale, I think, and what had been completed showed the war seen by individual soldiers. One supposed Sholokhov's future work and a new lead man would have to be dealt with. When we left the cinema it was raining heavily and we waited for the trolleybus in the rain. Albert's wife was with us: it is usual in the Soviet Union to allocate blocks of seats for films and other entertainment for sale to workers at local enterprises, apart from the ordinary public sales, and so the workers from the ice-cream factory had been to the film session.

An Old Acquaintance

If you head to the north of Irkutsk you get into the Ust-Ordynsky Buryat national area. By car you travel mostly through open country. The forests have receded and there

is steppeland with cattle grazing, attended by mounted herdsmen, and electric pylons stretching all the way and into the low hills.

We drove through the open country and across a low-banked river, passing villages of those log cottages with blue shutters that looked like toy houses. On the left I could see low hills in the distance, crested by trees, and piles of logs, and now and then what looked like those agricultural stations. The weather was still threatening and the clouds close, mist hanging over the countryside. There were big trucks continually passing on the road carrying loads of material: prefabricated building sections and parts of bridges. One could sense that a great deal of attention was being paid to the development of the interior.

Albert was singing. It was one of those convict songs handed down from the old times, for which Siberia is famous. There is one that goes, *Glorious Sea, Our Sacred Baikal,* but that would be sung as they peered through the carriage windows by those travelling on the Trans-Siberian Railway that passed along the south of the lake for some miles.

The Buryat Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic stretches all along the southern and eastern shores of Baikal and down to the border of Mongolia, and is, of course, part of the Russian Federation. An autonomous republic has its own constitution, which deals with its specific features, its own Supreme Soviet, Council of Ministers, Supreme Court, and local bodies of power and administration. It has its own territory which may not be altered without its consent, its judicial system, legislation on economic and cultural development, its citizenship, emblem and flag and capital city. It is equally represented in the Soviet of Nationalities of the USSR Supreme Soviet (11 deputies from each autonomous republic) and proportionally to the size of its population, on equal footing with other autonomous republics in the Supreme Soviet of the Union Republic of which it is part. There are sixteen autonomous republics in the Russian Federation, out of twenty within the Union republics of the whole USSR.

A national area has a specific national composition (although it is usually inhabited by several nationalities) and is as a rule sparsely populated. It is represented by one deputy in the Soviet of Nationalities of the USSR and proportionally to its population in the case of the Supreme Soviet of the Russian Federation. The bodies of state and administration, courts, procurator's office conduct their work in the mother tongue of the local nationality.

The Buryat national area where we were going is one of ten such areas.

We drove into Ust-Ordynsky, the centre of the area, past a petrol pump, the usual electricity pylons, and into the small town bristling with TV aerials. Outside the district centre were the red and white slogans calling, 'Forward to Communism', contrasting with the blue shutters of houses.

The district Party secretary who welcomed us was Raissa Mitienova, a sturdy-looking woman, in a smart frock, with well-kept Mongolian features. She was a graduate of the Irkutsk Pedagogical Institute, the Komsomol and Communist Party school in Moscow.

'Welcome,' she said, cheerfully. 'We have had delegations before, but no foreign writers. I'm sorry the weather is not very pleasant at the moment.'

I said: 'Thank you. But don't bother about the weather –we write about all kinds. This is not so bad, considering what I've heard about Siberia.'

'No. It can be very cold, and very hot too. But never mind, we'll go out and meet some people and we'll all cheer up.'

It had been raining and there were puddles in the street. 'We'll start with the local anthropological and natural history museum. It will give you some of our history first.' She was explaining that before the Revolution the Buryat people had had no script–now everybody could read and write and as usual education was in two languages, in this case Buryat and Russian, with the choice of first preference left to parents or pupils. 'The schools also teach a foreign language as well, English, German or French.'

In the little museum we saw examples of the people's past and present life: the round *yurts* of the old nomads, ancient tools, ploughs, fur clothing, decorative work. There were photographs of war veterans and heroes of socialist labour and also pictures of various modern machinery. There was a photograph of an elderly man with a big grey handle-bar moustache and a chestful of medals. He was a local hero: several war medals and awards for distinctive labour. He was a shepherd.

'Of course, although we are a Buryat area, there are more than our own people living here. We have no single purely Buryat farm or village. There are nineteen different nationalities scattered throughout our forty-eight state and collective farms. However, as a Buryat area, in terms of raising the level of the local nationals, Buryats get some privileges connected with acquiring higher education.'

Back at the Party office I chatted to a Buryat surgeon and a neurologist. They looked shy and very modest and asked questions about medical facilities in South Africa, and quietly showed curiosity and dismay when I explained medicine under apartheid to them. Most Soviets I have met find racial discrimination difficult to comprehend and it usually takes a lot of explanation. Those who were victims of the nazis have a better understanding.

There was the technical school which the apprentice harvesters and the tractor mechanics attended, nine hundred and sixty-seven of them, from the area; and we were shown the teaching methods, theoretical, practical, visual. The students who studied there usually started after the eight-grade normal school and stayed for three years. They received board and lodging and a stipend paid by the state, and those who belonged to a particular farm were even paid a wage by the farm while they did their course. In addition to mechanics they also had to learn the basics of agronomy. After the three-year course the certificates were awarded which made them full farm-machinery experts.

One of the farms, from which some of the boys came, was another Lenin Collective Farm. There must be hundreds of farms all over the USSR named after Lenin. This

one lay among low rolling green hills and ploughed land and we drove, accompanied by Raissa Mitienova who joined Albert in one of his local songs, while the town car with the rest of our hosts led the way. The wet country road wandered through fields sprouting young corn which was the main crop there.

'Last year a lot of the harvest was lost because of the weather,' our hostess said. 'We have been experimenting with a breed that might withstand the extreme cold, but the weather is very severe in winter.' Apart from corn they raised cattle and sheep, grew potatoes. 'As I said, we might be a Buryat area, but there are many other peoples living here, Russians, Ukrainians, Byelorussians, Tatars and others.'

There was also a Polish village populated by descendants of those who had fled here during the reactionary times of Stolypin.*

'There is an interchange of language taking place all the time, mixed marriages and cultural assimilation. The *Surkhaban* is the traditional archery contest, it goes back to old tribal times, you know, but now anybody takes part in the district and national competitions, and, of course, today tribalism only exists in books about the old times. There is my cousin, for example, who married a Russian girl, and each of their two children decided upon their own nationality when they applied for passports. One stated Russian and the other Buryat.'

We came up to the farm village. Because of the recent rain the streets were black with mud and we had to use the boardwalks that lined them. At the village centre we met the local dignitaries: the Party chairman and the chairman of the village Soviet, the chief agronomist, the head zoologist, and others, a mixture of both sexes, as well as a figure I recognised from the photograph in the museum: the medals hanging weightily and the grey handle-bar moustache–the shepherd with the Order of the October Revolution, the Orders of

* P. A. Stolypin–from 1906 to 1911 Chairman of the Council of Ministers and Minister of the Interior in tsarist Russia. Directed the suppressive and punitive action against the 1905-1907 revolution in Russia.–*Ed.*

Lenin, the rows of awards for heroism in the Patriotic War.

The history of the farm was recounted; it had grown out of a combination of two farms in 1959 and now covered 30,000 hectares and they had bulls, cows, sheep and four hundred horses, forty harvester combines and fifty trucks and cars. They had had misfortunes with the corn, but had already overfulfilled the meat quota by a 110 per cent for the present five-year plan. The quota for milk production would certainly be fulfilled. They even had a milkmaid who was a member of the Supreme Soviet. As for pay a milkmaid earned on average about as much as a city factory worker and any other collective farm worker. Farm workers also had a slight advantage over the city dweller in that the families had plots where they subsidised themselves by growing their own vegetables.

Here they had two secondary schools and two of the ubiquitous *Dom Kultury*, two medical centres and two libraries. A lot of things seemed to go in pairs. Even the hero shepherd had been wounded twice in the war.

'What do your grandchildren do?' I asked him.

'Grandchildren?' The flamboyant moustaches bobbed. 'Grandchildren? I have no grandchildren, I'm a young man myself!' Everybody laughed again and I asked on which fronts he had fought.

'I was on the Ukrainian front and then on the Byelorussian, and went as far as Weimar in Germany.'

'Well, I hope you don't have to fight another war.'

He shook his head and the moustaches moved simultaneously, like parading guards. 'No, we don't need it.'

We trod precariously around the muddy village. There was an ancient wooden church, disused and boarded up. The wooden village cottages all had front gardens full of Siberian flowers called *zharki*. An old lady invited us into her cottage, smiling and nodding welcome to everybody. She and her husband were newly retired and did some gardening, she said, showing us around. They had three children, one of the girls worked in Irkutsk. In the living room were carpets on the floor, a sideboard full of bric-à-brac and above the TV set a collection of family

snapshots and faded religious pictures, time-bleached imitation icons. She wanted to prepare *chai* for everybody, but was assured that there were still other places to see.

They had a children's *kombinat,* a combined kindergarten and primary school. 'There was a Bulgarian delegation here once,' somebody said. 'When we mentioned this *kombinat,* they all asked in amazement: do you mean a place where you manufacture children?'

We tripped back along the boardwalks and gangways laid across the muddy streets, past the yellow *zharki* flowers under the TV aerials towards the local *stolovaya* (the eating-house). Here a long table had been laid out with the usual collective farm fare and I was given a place in the middle of one side with Raissa Mitienova opposite me. The waitresses seemed to have an air of especial readiness. We did justice to the *zakuski* to the accompaniment of clicking glasses and the range of speeches and toasts.

Somebody must have signalled and the waitresses, who had been participating in the toasts and the exchanged banter, now departed to the kitchen. I wondered what they had been so anxious to produce.

I stared with a feeling of trepidation. There was an old acquaintance of mine–the ears flopping dejectedly, the eyes glassily accusing, the teeth sneering–as the leading waitress bore the steaming sheep's head triumphantly towards me.

'It's an old Buryat custom,' Raissa Mitienova said. 'Only for honoured guests.'

I imagined the custom being born from the East by the advancing nomads, from Mongolia perhaps, into Buryatiya and from thence to Kazakhstan. It was like fate stalking me.

Being an honoured guest herself, and a woman, custom demanded that she be presented with the ceremonial sheep's paunch, stuffed and boiled like a version of Scotch haggis (perhaps, the Scottish custom had even come from these parts too), and so there we were, she bisecting the stomach and sharing out the spiced and boiled contents, while I did the same with the head. At least my Buryat friends showed some pleasant surprise at my expertise.

Out of Tribalism

The Revolution of 1917 opened the way to socialism to all the peoples of Russia irrespective of what stage of socio-economic development they were at. In the case of the ethnic minorities of the East, namely in Siberia, who under tsarism had been on the brink of extinction, these became the first in world history to come to socialism by being able to bypass not only capitalism (from feudalism as in the case of most of Central Asia), but essentially the whole class-divisive stage of social development. In the course of a single generation these peoples advanced from communal-tribal forms to socialist culture.

Before the Revolution a great part of Siberia—Northern and North-Eastern Asia—was inhabited by small ethnic groups, comprising the most backward region of tsarist Russia. There were no industrial enterprises there and the indigenous population was scattered over a vast territory. As in the case of old Turkestan, these peoples were considered 'aliens'. Their productive communal system, property and social differentiation proceeded very slowly because of the great difficulty in obtaining or exchanging any sort of surplus. Exploitation by communal chiefs likewise was of a rudimentary character and happened mainly in various forms of tribal mutual assistance.

Exploitation from without developed much more intensively. The tsarist treasury took advantage of a potentially extensive source of revenue. For example, in the form of tax in kind alone it yielded thousands of fur pelts a year. However, the bulk of the furs were bought by private traders (especially after the money tax was introduced) who cheated the indigenous inhabitants and corrupted them with drink. Traditional structures of social ties were shaken, local chieftains gradually lost their prestige under the incursions of traders and kulaks, or otherwise commenced to engage in exploitative commerce themselves.

In a nutshell, the contact of the indigenous peoples with civilisation and its technological achievements took place in forms distorted by exploitation and commercial-

ism. It meant the collapse of their customary way of life and brought disease, poverty and extinction.

The victorious Soviet Government undertook a number of measures aimed at helping these peoples quickly and painlessly to join the new, socialist way of life. Painstaking explanatory and organisational work of Russian and local Communists among the working section of the population, along with other measures, was directed towards introducing a new tenor of life.

The extirpation of hidebound illusions about the 'tribal' unity of the poor man and the kulak, of the rank-and-file member of the commune and the chief or shaman; these illusions were replaced by the class demarcation of the working element from the parasitical stratum of traders and tribal chiefs. Class-consciousness of the working masses was forged in the process of developing political maturity and ideas of democratic self-government and state power.

In addition, the socialist industrialisation of the whole territory laid the basis for radical economic changes, modifying the material basis of the traditional social structure of the peoples of Siberia, and creating new branches of the economy there. Cultural centres were created in the remote *taiga* (forest regions) and the tundra plains. Writing systems were devised, as a great part of the various groups had no written language, and schools, books, newspapers appeared. Also the training of local cadres and of educators, specialists and the development of a national intelligentsia played a large role.

In 1925, the 1st Far Eastern Congress was convened to discuss problems relating to economic activity and life of the peoples in the course of implementing Soviet power and socialist economy. Such measures stimulated widespread interest. Distant nomads and settled people sent representatives to the cities to learn about setting up Soviets and co-operatives. Discussions produced the idea of creating indigenous territorial Soviets in addition to tribal Soviets, and the divisions of national districts.

Gradually the development of the territory in the East, as in Central Asia, was planned on a modern and scientific basis. It has become an important element of state and

economic policy and a matter of vital interest to the whole Soviet people. The road to socialism, traversed by these once scattered and virtually inaccessible and backward minorities, testifies to the essential connection between the abolition of the exploitation of man by man, on the one hand, and eliminating the privileges of some and the discrimination against other nations, nationalities and tribal communities, on the other.

While retaining the unique features of the socialist culture they have developed, the numerically small peoples of Siberia and the Far East have become, at the same time, an inseparable part of what is coming to be known as the Soviet people, and are actively engaged in the common effort of further developing the whole of the USSR.

To Bratsk

If you visit Siberia you must see the hydroelectric power stations. 'You can't see the wood for the power stations,' some unknown established the quip which is now known throughout the territory.

The first plans for the electrification of Russia said, among other things: '...There can be no doubt that in the future the Angara River and the whole area around it will play a relevant role in Siberia.'

It was in the 1950s that it was decided to build a whole cascade of hydroelectric power stations on the Angara and the major project of this scheme was the Bratsk Hydroelectric Power Station. Representatives of about twenty Soviet nationalities answered the call of the Communist Party, the Komsomol and the government to clear the wilderness of *taiga* forest and to build the power station.

For hundreds of years Eastern Siberia had remained unknown. In the 16th century, Russian explorers ventured up the Angara and built a wooden fort on the territory of Buryatiya. One of the largest power stations on earth, and likewise the biggest artificial lake in the world, are now located in this area.

When we arrived, the town of Bratsk had just celebrated the 20th anniversary of the station–work on it began

in 1955. The sky was still the concrete-grey and the rain dripped as we hurried into the new-looking little airport. We took a bus from the airport, along with other passengers, and drove past old-fashioned log houses and trees until we stopped at a crossroads of what looked like a village or suburb. Here we had to get out, because the bus wasn't going to the place we wanted. We found a taxi and drove through dense forestland in which light rain dribbled from the birch trees. Cottages like elfin houses crowded together in an old suburb that receded into the area still called Greentown, where the pioneers of Bratsk had pitched the first tents in the wilds of the *taiga.* A lot of the original site is under water now, covered by dam and reservoir.

Great trailer-trucks were still hauling material along the road that went up hill and down dale, and then the town rose before us at the foot of the slope, a barricade of apartment blocks grey in the mist and then turning white and checkered-pink from the lightening as we drew near. The weather was lifting and the town closed in around with its modern-design apartments, offices, balconies and the broad Peace Street with its green lawns: it was really a mixture of boulevard and park.

We checked in at the Hotel Taiga. The hotel was quiet and new and one knew by the credit-card signs by the cashier's window it was apt to receive many foreign visitors. From my room I could look down at an intersection at Peace Street, and beyond the blocks of flats to a glimpse of water, which was the artificial sea of Bratsk and, hazily beyond, a line of low hills under the pale-grey of the sky.

How does one describe a dam, and the biggest in the world at that? Our car took us down a winding road that led right down to the bank of the Angara and there it was, a mighty wall across the river, a kilometre in length and 125 metres high. Its top had the look of battlements of some futuristic castle, while the huge buttresses sloped down from it, interspersed by sluice gates. This way one escaped the technical jargon and only the feeling that this was really an example of how man could conquer nature, the elements, was left. I had seen the dam

down near Volgograd and saw them still in the process of building Nurek, but this one, finished and functioning, seen from the bank of the Angara, made one feel somewhat puny; again recall Wells' scepticism of 'the dreamer in the Kremlin'.

All round its cables, connected to a veritable *taiga* of steel pylons and porcelain insulators, silently carried the power away to cities and factories, chemical works and lumber mills, mines and steel plants. Across it motor traffic passed like toys drawn on an invisible string. Behind it pressed 169 cubic kilometres of water, 100 metres deep in some parts.

Parties of tourists were debussing near us at the feet of the vast *barrage.* A young blonde, whose name was Nadezhda (Hope), took charge of me and Georgi and took us through the plate glass doors into halls of decorative marble, showed us around the long room where the tops of ranked generators looked like a row of monster flowers of steel growing out of the floor below which the turbines each passed 240 cubic metres of water per second to generate 225,000 kilowatts each. In the wall an automatic register clicked away showing the amount of electricity being created each second. In a room a few technicians sat at consoles that controlled the whole computerised dam.

We said good-bye to Nadezhda, a young technician who helped keep this electricity-producing giant in control. She looked very young, but Bratsk is really a young place, so she seemed symbolic. Two-thirds of the population are under thirty and the dam itself had started operating only in 1961. They were all young, and all the time young people were arriving there to develop the entire region.

We drove back through the forest country and went to look at the Bratsk Fortress, which the first explorers had built. All around the vast *taiga* was being pushed back, as the new timber mill raised mountains of logs for use all over the USSR. Up river was the new aluminium plant and iron-ore-processing plant where the Ilim joined the Angara. The construction of the Bratsk Hydroelectric Power Station and the adjoining industrial complex cost the gov-

ernment 3,500 million rubles. The general scheme for the distribution of industry in Siberia provided for the creation of over 280 new industrial complexes involving more than 3,500 factories. Two hundred and forty complexes were already under construction, to be fed by the series of power stations like the Bratsk and Sayano-Shushenskaya on the Yenisei River and the future Ust-Ilimsk.

The Carpenter of Bratsk

The weather had cleared and we walked down the main street and looked at the shops. Women were laying a stretch of decorative lawn in front of a new block of flats and a water truck was spraying the street. We found the local bookshop, the *Dom Knigi*, and wandered around looking at the books. I had left the *Ramayana* and the detective adventure with my main bag in Irkutsk and needed something to read, but what they had were accounts of the local region for the benefit of tourists: 'What is it really like, this mysterious *taiga* realm, figuring in many songs and legends?'

When we got back to the hotel, I was introduced to Comrade Karl Ivanovich. He was a tall and lean man with a seamed face, which gave the impression of having aged through hard life and work. He was after all a pioneer of Bratsk, one of the town's frontiersmen. 'When I got here there were only two houses,' he said while we were having lunch. 'I am a carpenter now. I had volunteered to come up here to help build the place. So I learned my trade here. We lived in tents for the most part. Later on I was able to have my wife join me. So you can guess, I saw this town grow up. We had to clear the forest; we were invaded continually by insects, mosquitoes. We were also building the power station and the timber works then.'

'So you must be proud of your town.'

'I like it,' he said modestly. 'It is good to see something grow before your eyes.'

'Yesterday he received an award, he is a labour hero,' our interpreter said.

'Pozdravlyayu Vas,' I said. 'Congratulations,' and the seamed face blushed boyishly.

He was from Kirov, but had actually been born in Leningrad; his family had moved away from there before the siege.

'What do you remember of the war?' I asked.

He said with a faraway look: 'Being hungry.' Then added: 'My father was killed in the war.' He smiled, 'Now I have my roots in Bratsk, I don't want to move away.' He had a son in the ninth grade and a second child of ten. His wife had also graduated from technical college and worked in the timber and cellulose industry. I suppose we are well off, because I am now a master craftsman and my wife is a technician.' No, they didn't own a car, but preferred walking. 'For recreation we might go to a rest-house or to our *dacha* (summer cottage) for the weekend. Also, everybody here likes fishing.'

Once a month he served with a 'volunteer public order squad' for a few hours. These squads represent the most common form of mass participation in upholding public order. They are set up on a voluntary basis by working people's collectives and a volunteer spends a few hours of free time patrolling public places. If they meet with any serious violation of the law they may detain the offender and hand him over to the militia which is the official body for public security and other. It protects the personal safety of citizens, public and personal property, and controls traffic.

'Do you have any serious violations of the law?' I asked.

'Nothing serious, everything is quiet here. Well, I suppose some families have a lame duck.' I took it he meant the equivalent of a 'black sheep'. 'No, we don't have much of that kind of trouble.'

We must come and meet his carpentry brigade, he urged. 'We did the woodwork for this hotel.' He gestured around the dining-room.

We did go to the factory the next day and he introduced us to the director first and then to members of his brigade of woodworkers, which included a teenage girl who blushed and smiled shyly. They presented me with a

plaque of carved wood symbolising the Soviet victory in the war and captioned *Unvanquished.* The director showed us around the furniture factory (they also made swings for the parks, and kindergarten and school furniture) and the paintworks where women seemed to be enjoying themselves like babes among the various colours they produced.

Afterwards Karl Ivanovich came back into town with us and he took us to look at the war memorial in one of the parks. The war dead of the surrounding region were all named in raised stone script and there was an elderly woman reading the names. 'Ivan Petrovich,' she said to somebody. 'He was from our village,' and the tears ran down her old cheeks. Behind the giant enterprise of the Soviet Union there will always linger a great sadness too, for millions of its perished children; nowhere could one escape the sorrow.

The Musical City

The representative of the Writers Union, who met us at Novosibirsk Airport, was a tubby man with cropped hair, in shirt-sleeves and uniform trousers. He introduced himself as Ivan Krasnov and was all exuberance, immediately launching volubly into the pleasure it was that I had come, that I would soon see the significance of his home city. In the car he had waiting, I discovered the reason for his uniform trousers–he had a matching tunic that went with it, and after struggling into it and buttoning up, he became Lieutenant-Colonel Ivan Krasnov, in full regalia. He was a great conversationalist, keeping up a commentary which Georgi laboured to translate, all the way into the city.

Novosibirsk is divided by the Ob River and we crossed the long bridge that joined this 'Siberian capital' that sprawls on each bank. It is also called the City of New Addresses, because the residents pridefully point out that over the past decade 130 thousand flats have been handed over, celebrated by an average of forty house-warming parties a day. Otherwise, it is one of the Soviet Union's biggest engineering centres. It had contributed to Egypt's

Aswan Dam and planned transformer substations from Aswan to Cairo and Alexandria. The farm machinery plant produced special seed drills and mounted harrows used not only in Siberia, but which were exported to Mongolia, Vietnam, Iraq and other parts.

Lieutenant-Colonel Krasnov was indeed proud of his city in which the first supporters of Soviet power had fought the interventionists who had invaded Siberia; he was proud of the Red Army.

'But I am retiring now,' he said cheerfully. 'By tomorrow I should be in civvies. Tonight I'll perform my last public duty wearing my uniform–at the anniversary concert of our famous Siberian Choir. You must come.'

The Siberian Folk Choir had been formed in 1945 and was now holding its 30th anniversary at the Novosibirsk Opera and Ballet Theatre, which had been built during the war. Building had been started in 1941 and had gone on, in spite of the nazi invasion, the population confident that the war would be won. It was opened by the Siberian Choir's first performance of Glinka's *Glory*.

I was introduced to the conductor, People's Artist of the USSR, Andrei Novikov, backstage among the choristers sorting out costumes, the props of former and future performances, the smell of greasepaint and powder. He somehow *did* look like a leader and conductor of music. Do they develop particular characteristics? Before the concert there were the congratulatory speeches and the presentation of jubilee presents: the District Communist Party, the Komsomol, the trade unions and individual amateur choirs from factories and schools, the Siberian Army Division, the actors of the *Maly* (small) Theatre, Moscow, the Kuban Cossack Choir. Krasnov, representing the Writers Union, took me by surprise by announcing me, hoping I would mention the choir somewhere in my writing, and I had to get up and show myself to everybody and a little girl brought me a sprig of flowers in welcome.

Who can ignore mentioning the concert by a Russian choir, and especially the Siberian Folk Choir? I always believed the Latins produced singing by individuals, serenades, and so on; but it took the Africans, Welsh and Rus-

sians to father choral singing. Anybody who gets a chance to hear the Siberian Folk Choir should not miss it. Singing to the blaze of colour of folk costumes that made the stage blossom, and the songs interspersed by those furious folk dances, which always seem to be taking place in mid-air. Thirty and thirty more years to them then.

National elections day was also drawing near. I remembered that right up to this time, while I was travelling, I had seen none of the hullabaloo usually associated with elections. In all the towns and cities and villages there had been the red signboards indicating *agitpunkts,* the bureaus from which the campaigns were organised, the candidates' offices and the canvassers meeting points, but there had been no hustling or ballyhoo. Soviet election campaigns seem to proceed in a quiet manner, presumably relying on local meetings and personal contact and the political consciousness of the people to determine the direction to take.

So, there we were in Novosibirsk that weekend. Georgi had met two students who wrote poetry and invited them to dinner. In the meantime, Intourist had attached a tall and lanky blonde guide, Lyudmila by name, to us, but we had to share her with a New Zealand party. So, on Saturday she accompanied us on a ferry-boat ride up and down the sea, which is a sort of lake on the length of the Ob River by the city. The weather had lifted and it was suddenly hot and the boat ride was a relief, the breeze on the river blowing in our faces.

At dinnertime in the restaurant on the ground floor Georgi told me to hold the table against newcomers, while he went in search of the girls he had met. When he returned, he was with two well-decorated blondes, though while one had a sort of Brigitte Bardot look, the other preferred a severe Jane Eyre hairstyle.

Brigitte wrote poetry and Jane Eyre prose. The restaurant band played *Moon River.* I asked Jane Eyre whether she did a lot of writing and she said, '*Ochen!* (Very much).' That seemed to terminate our conversation. They started to talk about Françoise Sagan in Russian, while I listened to the band play *Kalinka.* I was somewhat out

of my league with Sagan in the Russian language and preferred Russian music instead. Some of the diners from Odessa wanted to hear a local number called *Street*, whereupon they got up and did some energetic dancing. Afterwards the crooner sang 'Oh, how we danced on the night we were wed' and the Russian favourite, a swing waltz, took place.

Brigitte Bardot suddenly remembered reading of a demonstration in London by writers over library royalties and wanted to know from me: 'Is John Updike rich?' The band finished with *In the Summertime.* It was ten o'clock and the band packed up. It was still light and through the restaurant windows I could see people in straw sombreros coming up the street from the direction of the beach along the river bank. On the side-walk a man, who appeared to be a deaf-mute, was talking sign language to his companion. After the ice-cream we packed up, too, and Georgi saw the girls off and I went up to my room and the neon sign over the provision store opposite came on.

The Silent Town

At the 20th Congress of the Communist Party, held in 1956, Siberia was described as a land of immense potential, which was to be transformed into a region of gigantic power stations and factories, of new towns and advanced farming. Advance posts of modern science had to be set up in Siberia to ensure its systematic and rapid development. When scientists were asked to go east, many readily responded and their ideas of setting up research centres in Siberia were approved. In 1957, the establishment of the Siberian Branch of the USSR Academy of Sciences was adopted, and between 1958 and 1968 the branch developed many large subdivisions.

The academic centre of Novosibirsk studies almost every range of scientific problems. Twenty institutions have been concentrated there, including a computer centre, a university, technical library, botanical gardens.

Half an hour's drive from Novosibirsk and we arrived at the town of science, Akademgorodok. Founded in 1959, its first lectures were delivered in the forest to 3,500 stu-

dents. Now a city had grown up there, and with Lyudmila explaining everything with her Intourist expertise, there was little difficulty in understanding the functions of this novel community.

Only that day something seemed strange about this concentration of highly advanced institutions with its present population now of 56,000. Builders Avenue, the first street to be constructed, was quiet. The windows in the blocks of residential flats peeped silently out over the balconies, like blind rectangular eyes. We drove along silent thoroughfares lined with lawns and trees. After a while we stopped and got out, telling the chauffeur to drive slowly on while we strolled, the sunshine hot and pleasant in contrast to the graveyard silence.

It was like walking through some ultra-modern Valley of the Dead: the vast block of the nuclear physics section loomed ahead of us, blank and silent and shut up like a tomb, on either side the chemistry building and the biological institute were locked mausoleums, everywhere the vast oblong blocks of the mathematical, genetical and geophysical buildings seemed deserted. Nothing moved, no sound was heard. We were puzzled. What could have happened?

We strolled further. The semi-detached houses of the staff were locked and empty too. It was as if everybody, every soul had fled, abandoned their posts, science, the world.

In a garden–it must have belonged to some professor of anthropology–a collection of great excavated heads with grotesque faces carved from stone rose out of the lawn, snarling mouths, bulging eyes. It reminded me of pictures of these mysterious stone heads on the Easter Island in the Pacific Ocean: very little was known about them, or who had placed them there.

The famous Akademgorodok stood around us, its edifices looming over us, blank and empty, as if some mysterious disease had obliterated everybody.

'It's bloody well *Sunday*,' I said finally. 'That's what. It's Sunday and nobody's working or at home.'

Lyudmila giggled. 'It's election day too.'

We found the car and drove to the community centre, made up of ultra-modern buildings housing the Moskva

Kinoteatr (movie theatre) and, of course, the *Dom Kultury* called *Akademiya.* There was some life. Upstairs was the polling station in a long, polished hall, the booths behind pale-blue hangings, while electoral officials sat at tables with the voters' rolls and voting slips. But there were few voters now; the majority had made their crosses earlier that morning and almost the entire population had evacuated to the beach.

When we visited the House of Culture at Akademgorodok we were shown the ingenious work of the child artist, Nadya Rusheva, who died tragically of cerebral haemorrhage at the age of 17. Her drawings, dating from infancy, paintings, colourwashes and sketches line the gallery. She was a child genius who, perhaps, really had been meant to live only that short time.

We went down the stairway that led from the river bank to the beach. The sands swarmed with life, as if a great migration of ants had taken place from the scientific nest above; it looked as if the entire population of the 56,000, young and old, bikinis and modest beach wear, were gambolling and splashing in the Ob and strewing its flank with ice-cream cartons.

I even met one of the New Zealanders there: a bearded young man in shorts who told me he had once been a motorcycle racer. 'It became too dangerous so I quit,' he said. 'I made a lot of money, but I valued my neck more.'

'Are you on holiday?' I asked.

He said: 'Oh, we're doing a trip. Came up to Vladivostok and we have been heading towards Moscow by stages on the Trans-Siberian Railway. Then by plane from Moscow to London. Why, you can see the whole country bit by bit travelling on the Trans-Siberian.'

'Trans-Siberian Railway,' I said. 'You mean there *is* such a thing? I haven't *seen* it, let alone travel on it.' I had been hinting to my companion about travelling by the railway instead of by plane, but something seemed to be distracting his attention each time. 'Well,' I said to the New Zealander, 'have a good trip in case I don't see you again.'

The Science Town

Akademgorodok was alive and working again when we went there two days later. There were students hurrying along the Prospekt Nauki (Science Avenue) as we made our way to the Institute of History, Philology and Philosophy. The scientific secretary of the institute Alexeyev introduced us to a roomful of co-workers, among them a Professor Briedova, who was an Altai woman.

One of the projects of the institute had been to write the history of Siberia. There had been some scepticism about this, but they had set to work in 1961 and by 1969 the last (fifth) volume had been completed; the work had been translated into Japanese, published in the USA and Canada. Over 200 writers and researchers had taken part in the project and in 1973 the institute had been awarded the Lenin Prize.

The research done even before the formation of this institute had helped in revealing and assisting towards resolving problems pertaining to the socialist development of the scattered indigenous minorities inhabiting Siberia: the adjustment of these peoples to the new way of life, their reorientation from primitive ideas to advanced ideology. A great deal of pioneering work had been done by the Leningrad Institute of the Peoples of the North. In many cases the indigenous peoples had no written language, they spoke variously rooted languages: Turkic, Mongol, Palaeo-Asian, Eskimo-Aleut, and so on. In the beginning, philologists had experimented with phonetic sound symbols and grammar for each language, gradually introduced a written script, and finally these once primitive, nomadic, semi-nomadic, reindeer herders, and trappers had produced their own teachers, writers, scientists, produced their own newspapers and books, magazines like *Baikal* and *Pole Star*. (My old friend Yuri Rytkheu is of the tiny minorities of the Soviet Far East and is today one of the USSR's most popular writers.) Professor Nikolai Onienko, one of the company, a sturdy man with Oriental features, was of the Nanai people who today have a population of only about ten thousand.

Dr. Vladlen Timokhin, bearded and bespectacled, took us around his History Museum. He is the curator and an enthusiastic talker completely knowledgeable and determined to show you every inch of his museum, explaining with ease as he wanders among the exhibits. Later, he presented me with a small volume of poetry by the poets of Siberian peoples.

One saw one's own ancestry among the exhibits under Timokhin's care. Didn't that Siberian mask look like a Dogon monkey mask from Dahomey (now Benin)? Was that not a Khoi-Khoin bow? A statue from some ancient Egyptian period? All men had started with similar social organisation, had looked at the Universe of far-off, mist-ridden times through the same eyes.

Now his descendants sat in Akademgorodok. The harnessed elements cracked among the high-voltage grid in the Institute of Power Research; the once frightening mysteries of the Aurora Borealis had become a subject of Dr. Nikolai Rogov.

'Siberian Lights'

Later we went to visit the publishers of the oldest magazine in the USSR, *Sibirskiye Ogni* (Siberian Lights). For a few minutes we lost our way among a lot of concrete stairways and tiled landings in a strange building, and eventually found the editorial offices in the House of Industries. Somewhere beyond there were rooms devoted to electronics and metallurgy.

Anatoly Nikulkov was the editor and welcomed us as fellow-members of the profession and chatted about our work and his own and the history of his magazine.

'There were only 60,000 people living in Novosibirsk when *Siberian Lights* was founded,' he said, passing around the cigarettes. 'There had been no cultural amenities in the city—Kolchak had just been expelled, the Civil War ebbed away, and typhus and other diseases were rampant. In 1927, on the occasion of the magazine's fifth birthday, the chief editor Zazubrin said: 'We shall have industrialisation. Let us also agree that the magazine *Sibirskiye*

Ogni and the newspaper *Sovetskaya Sibir* shall be the beginning of literary industrialisation. In other words, we shall have our own local literature, based on local material, but equal to the all-Union literature in importance and quality.'

'We are not doing too badly today,' Nikulkov said. 'There is a steady stream of stories and as for local material, it comes from many of the minority groups. They write in both languages, you know, their own and Russian. The writers of Altai say *Siberian Lights* opened the way for them. Your friend Rytkheu was first published here, and others were also–Buryat writers, Yakuts. The national minorities write mostly poetry–that's a result of the youngness of their script, I think, and it is easier to demonstrate the folkloric character through poetry.'

In Novosibirsk there are publishing houses for Western Siberia, in Irkutsk–for the East, but there are no strict divisions.

'Is anything special happening in the writing field nowadays?' I asked.

'Well, you know, this year is the 150th anniversary of the Decembrist revolt of 1825. So, there are a lot of historical stories, and somebody is writing a novel about it.'

Afterwards we left the publishing house and walked back down the main avenue along the bank of the Ob, in the direction of our hotel. Novosibirsk is the only city to have been founded by a writer, Mikhailovsky, who was also an engineer working on the construction of the Trans-Siberian Railway (!); and it is the meeting place of the two natural resources of the territory–the *taiga* and the steppe. On the left bank of the Ob there are no forests, only steppeland; from the right bank the great forests stretch all the way to the Pacific.

We came to the bear circus: it was a large pit in the ground somewhere along the avenue. But the bears seemed to be taking the day off and no amount of teasing from spectators could awaken them from their lethargic contemplation of the silly humans. Bear circus aside, Novosibirsk is also third in line in ballet fame, the first

being the Bolshoi of Moscow, of course, and next the Kirov of Leningrad.

At the *Dom Knigi*, the large bookshop, we browsed among the books, and, lo and behold, I even found a copy of my own *In the Fog of the Seasons' End* in the *Roman-Gazeta* edition.

The Titan Makers

The plane circled Novosibirsk and the Ob receded below, a glittering grey and crooked streak–Ob, the 'grandmother' of rivers, Siberia's Volga–and the city huddling around her skirts. The smoke from factories–it might be the giant Sibenergo works where they manufactured those great steel and copper wire titans that generated electric power from the roaring rivers of Siberia and many other places.

There under trees and brick walls the workshops grumble like mastiffs on a chain, the giant lathes spin and cut slivers of metal like cheese and, part by part, section by section, the great metal monsters are assembled, the cranes along the ceilings carrying hefty parts frighteningly over head. I felt a shiver down my spine treading carefully on the greasy floors among all these looming shadows of machinery, like a dwarf at the feet of a host of Cyclopes, and wondered at the ease with which the greasy-grimy workers, men and women, moved and handled these metallic dinosaurs.

Five thousand workers turned out these titans of electric production for power dams, mines, railways. They have their own scientific institute and produce their own newspaper *Generator*, having a circulation of 1,000 copies a week. Started twenty-two years ago, the Novosibirsk electro-generator engineering plant is only one of Siberia's great enterprises. Here they make the generators of 300,000 kilowatts each and export them to 45 countries apart from supplying them for the Soviet Union; as at Bratsk, they were manned by people like the lean-faced Vladimir, a lathe operator whose wife and son also worked there and whose daughter attended an agricultural institute; and there was Vsevolod, a lively man with

spectacles who climbed down from a gantry to shake my hand and say *Namaste,* because he thought I was from India.

'Two years in India,' he said, talking loudly above the clatter. 'To train workers in Uttar Pradesh. We had installed a factory there.'

The factory's Party Deputy Secretary, Ivan Yazhek, showed us around. He had been a railway worker and then served in the war as a captain in the artillery. Discharged in 1954, he joined the factory in 1955 as a lathe operator, attending night-classes to become a master technician. In 1965, he had been elected Party Deputy Secretary as well.

As we were walking around the workshops, workers questioned him and he shook his head. He told me: 'They want to know if you are another foreign buyer. We have so many of them coming here all the time.'

It had been our last excursion in Novosibirsk. Now we set off for Tyumen.

The landscape grew tinier yet wider as the plane climbed. You could see the vastness of Siberia; Neruda wrote somewhere:

Here, wheat and steel were born
From the hand of man, from his breast.
The singing of hammers enlivens
The aged woods like a blue phenomenon.

'The 2,000 Soldiers'

At the smart, shiny Omsk Airport where we had to stop over on the flight, the crisp Intourist representative minced anxiously ahead of us, leading the way upstairs. 'They never let me know there was a foreigner on this flight,' he said anxiously and fluttered like a butterfly taken unawares. Perhaps he thought I was some rich tourist, who had to be led personally in the direction of the buffet: the *kolbasa* (the salami-like sausage) or sturgeon sandwiches, the bottles of *kefir.* He gestured artistically towards the refrigerated counter and breathlessly announced he would send somebody to collect us from the

smoking-room for take-off. The airport building shone with plate glass and polished wood, but you cannot dispel the simplicity, the unpretentiousness of the Soviet people: a stout woman, waiting for her flight, dozed over a bucket of eggs, a mother shushed her brood around a heap of cardboard suitcases and cartons tied with rope.

So, when we landed in Tyumen we found ourselves in a region riddled with history. And so everybody was eager to point out. We were met by Boris, a journalist, at the airport. He was with a man sporting a neat imperial beard. The bearded man owned a car and drove us into the city.

History commenced from the airport. Along that road, Boris explained, the exiles had marched on their way into the wilderness: Dostoyevsky, Chernyshevsky, the Decembrists, Polish prisoners. 'And the tsar and his family,' Boris said, 'on their way to Tobolsk.'

Tyumen is said to be the oldest Siberian city, nearly 400 years, having started as a stockaded village in 1586, inhabited by 300 settlers sent from Moscow. Rasputin had been born somewhere nearby, and its merchants had traded with China, Persia, Turkey. All this evidence one could discover at the historical museum, another one of the few museums I enjoyed. The lively past was there: the Tatar armour, and Russian billhooks and war axes, fur tents and deerskin clothes, all mingled with the leg-irons of prisoners, the monocles worn by Decembrists, the weapons captured from Kolchak or used by those who fought him during the Civil War, and the picture of the sailor who had captured the Tsar Nicholas himself. They were all clues to the past, like the mammoth's skeleton, which had been found nearby on a bank of the Tura river on which the city stood; the bison; and even rhinoceros; the *laska*, a tiny animal that, they said, could kill a horse.

So, we drove into the city of Tyumen; its population is 335,000. 'Tyumen' is a Mongol word meaning '2,000 soldiers', but one did not understand the association. But there was the old town first: the wooden houses with their friezework shutters, the Troitsky (Trinity) Church, a monastery that was being restored (a holy man, a saint,

had died and was buried in the gateway, because he wished to be walked upon by the people after death), an old Polish Catholic Church. We bumped over a log bridge across the Tura River. Bas-relief decorations of the fronts of the houses of the merchants of old (they had them decorated with a distemper made from eggs and milk), the old blue-and-white building which was or had been the Agricultural Institute where Nikolai Kuznetsov had studied. He was a partisan who had assassinated Koch, the nazi *gauleiter,* in Byelorussia. We proceeded from the old quarter to the new, with the ever-rising blocks of flats, the streets lined with elms, birches and larch, into Republic Street where the parades were held now, to the monument to the Heroes of the Revolution, the long rows of department stores and restaurants. History passed by and the present surrounded us again in the Sports Complex with its great tile murals portraying physical health, the Palace of Weddings, the boulevards. Where all these now stood, there had been a mere suburban village fifteen years before.

The man with the imperial beard dropped us off at the hotel and said good-bye, leaving Boris to attend to me and Georgi.

Actually it was a bright woman named Lika who explained and pointed out everything when we went to see the old city of '2,000 soldiers'. She knew the history of this place like the back of her hand.

Lika showed us the old white-painted building where Bolshevik power was first announced in Tyumen, and explained how the first legal meeting of the Party had taken place in the Philharmonic Hall in December 1919. Before the Revolution, the square had been a muddy morass, and only ten years ago, a timber market.

St. Vladimir of Tyumen

We stopped at the only practising church. Curiously, at the entranceway of this old building in the process of restoration, old women in headscarves and shawls sat holding out their wrinkled hands, asking for a few kopecks for the church. It was the first time I ever

met anybody openly begging for money in the Soviet Union: perhaps the church needed a new roof.

The Soviet Constitution says: 'Citizens of the USSR are guaranteed freedom of conscience, that is, the right to profess or not to profess any religion, and to conduct religious worship or atheistic propaganda. Incitement of hostility or hatred on religious grounds is prohibited.

'In the USSR, the church is separated from the state, and the school from the church.'*

The state does not interfere in the internal affairs of the various religious bodies, and vice versa. Not a single church receives or enjoys either material or moral support from the state, but a person's religion does not affect his civil life. No official form, be it passport application or census sheet, ever requires a person to state his religion, if any. For this reason it is difficult to determine the number of believers in the USSR.

I once came across an item which stated that a religious body known as the 'Whitsuntide Shakers' was forbidden. I could never find out who the Whitsuntide Shakers were and why they were prohibited, but Soviet law forbids only such religious groups which under the guise of faith interfere with the person or dignity of a citizen, impair his health or call upon their followers to disobey state legislation. By agreement with local government, any religious body of more than twenty people may receive the use of a house of worship free, but the congregation is responsible for its maintenance. Religious institutions may publish their own periodicals, prayer-books, and so on and may rent premises for the making of the various articles for religious rites. The incomes and revenues of the various religious societies and churches are, moreover, exempt from tax.

Well, here we were at the Saint Vladimir's, named after the Kiev prince who had brought Christianity, and built during the years from 1766 to 1786. We went quietly inside past the begging old women. Inside, the great altar shone with gold-leaf and blue paint; Christ

* *Constitution (Fundamental Law) of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics*, Article 52, Moscow, 1977, p. 47.

and the Virgin gazed sadly out from gilt frames. To one side, an elderly priest with sand-grey hair and a spade beard intoned the service for a small group of old women and one white-bearded old man in high boots, their gnarled hands moving, dry and calcined, as they crossed themselves. There was an atmosphere of age, everything, everybody was old: the icons, the ceiling, St. Vladimir on the wall, the old women with wrinkled hands held out for kopecks, all had a forlorn look. One was reminded of the mummified remains of ancient priests niched in the gloomy catacombs under the old cathedral in Kiev: perhaps, this Vladimir himself lay there, the skin like crumbling leather, the once-brilliant finery tarnished, turning to dust.

We retreated back to the new section of the city and evening came on. The weather had been fine all day, people were still grouped around the mobile *kvas** tanks on the streets. In the restaurant there was a party in progress in one of the side rooms and the voices of women were raised in the song *Moscow Nights.* I thought I saw a man whom I recognised from Cape Town, but I was wrong: perhaps it was only nostalgia creeping on. So, when I went upstairs I wrote a letter to Blanche before going to bed. I thought about the Trans-Siberian Railway and realised that I had not seen the Tyumen Railway Station—perhaps it was all a myth, it didn't really exist. Probably, the New Zealanders had taken a plane. It was one of the legends of Siberia, like the one about Shaman Baikal; something from the past, like the drums in the Tyumen museum which they had used in old times for bear-dancing. . . .

The Discoverers

Back in 1929, Tyumen had been manufacturing railway-sleepers' cutting machines, now it was exporting drilling machinery for oil and gas. There were 28 institutes doing all kinds of experiments and explorations. Tyu-

* *Kvas* is a non-alcoholic beverage made of rye and barley, popular in the Soviet Union.—*Ed.*

men is the main centre in a region that can take in the land area of Italy, France and Belgium. The oil and gas area of Tyumen Region has been called the 'discovery of the century'. The great giant of Siberia was giving up its treasures to the intrepid Soviet enterprise: Gulliver was being pinioned by the Lilliputians. It was more than ten years since the first well was drilled, but this region, with its untold resources, had already broken all records for the rate of expansion in oil extraction. By 1980, they will have extracted 310 to 320 million tons a year. Oil, gas, minerals and timber of the northern regions of Western Siberia will supply an industrial complex now under construction which is to be the largest in the Soviet Union. In spite of the stubborn swamplands, oil and gas pipelines and railways have been laid, petrochemical complexes have been built.

The Burning Land

This time the plane was crowded with students in khaki denim uniforms with sleeve patches that said Kiev SSO,* and I presumed they must be volunteers for some project up in the oilfields. Some of them had guitars. There had been some delay. It was hot while we waited for take-off and everybody seemed to be gently broiling. I sat opposite a husky girl who wore the same uniform as the others, jeans, blouse and shoulder-patch. The piped music played Russian tunes, then the popular theme from *The Godfather* and some more national music until we finally took off, dripping with perspiration.

The fields, pastures, enclosed meadows and forest around Tyumen were left behind. Far below the drifting puff-ball clouds, a river lay like a piece of bent wire. We were travelling north and through the window I could see the dense patches of green, the river wriggling haphazardly. Then the country turned almost entirely watery: long stretches overrun by pools and lakes and ponds, as if a

* Kiev SSO–Kiev Student Builders. Soviet university and college studens volunteer to help on building projects during their summer vacations. They are paid for their work. In 1975, student builders totalled 636,000.–*Ed.*

big samovar had been upset, drenching a carpet of green suede. It was all swampland, miles and miles of it. One wondered how man could traverse such a country except by air.

Western Siberia lies between the eastern foothills of the Urals Range and the Yenisei River with the Kara Sea in the north, covering an area of over two million square kilometres. Six hundred thousand square kilometres of this area is swampland in the heart of which, in Tyumen Region, lies one of the Soviet Union's biggest oil bases.

Our plane descended down into the swampland. The water-logged earth drew near and in the distance a tall orange flame danced in the mist, like a ghost out of Hades, as if some of the fire of hell below had escaped through a hole. It danced incongruously above the watery, fog-locked land—how did it survive in the wetness? In another part another pillar of fire quivered and danced eerily: one thought of biblical pillars of flame, Abraham and his son, Moses. But these were vents of gas in the earth, burning, I suppose, to prevent the live gas spreading.

Here and there too the tall derricks of oil wells rose, pumping away, sucking the black liquid gold from the earth, this horrid-looking, swamp-infested, oozing wilderness. We were coming down into the Samotlor gas and oil region.

In the eleven or so years since the first oil gusher began in Western Siberia, a series of new major oil and gas deposits have been found there. Some of them compare with the world's greatest. One of these is the Samotlor region. The oil deposits recently discovered at Lake Samotlor produce the fantastic amount of 1,000 tons a day. The Samotlor deposit alone is capable of producing 100 million tons of oil a year, which is as much as the entire Soviet Union produced as recently as 15 years ago. Along with the oil there is also gas. It is said that the whole region rests upon a vast underground lake of oil and gas.

In the midst of the uninhabited wilderness swamps and marshes provided a formidable obstacle to even the most powerful cross-country vehicles. Tractors were swallowed up, the frost turned tyres as brittle as glass and did the

same to steel pipes. Swarms of mosquitoes infested the region. Yet in the face of these natural barriers, Soviet workers succeeded in building new towns and urban settlements for those engaged in tapping gas, pumping oil—new names have appeared on the map of Siberia: Neftyugansk, Svetly, Nizhnevartovsk.

The Conquerors

We came down into Nizhnevartovsk Airfield—it was little more than a strip—to the music of a tango. To one side of the field helicopters were parked, giant brown insects showing that man could beat anything nature had to offer. In the distance the flowers of fire still quivered in their taunting dances, like challenging shamans.

The denim-clad brigade was mustered and led away. We were met by Fyodor, a journalist, and taken off to where a jeep waited, and we set out into the town.

Everywhere there were trucks and jeeps—I never saw an automobile; there were signs of building, clearing and excavating: everywhere piles of piping, logs, girders. The road, laid section by section of concrete, was bumpy, cracked in parts, battling to survive against heat, frost and the heavy-laden traffic.

'We've got 340 kilometres of road in the region now,' Fyodor was saying, 'and ten thousand trucks and jeeps. Samotlor is 75 per cent swamp and a great deal is spent on laying sand and then most of the building is done on piles.'

The jeep giving way to the giant trucks coming and going bumped along the road. On each side of the road the swampland and intermittent woods stretched away and the orange gas jets sounded like bull-roarers in the distance.

Nizhnevartovsk was a boom town. The essentials were all there, the blocks of workers' flats, the stores, the *kino*, but the streets in many parts had not been laid yet, and the bustling population splashed through mud. Only completed three years before, it was a busy town, full of oil workers and their families, parked trucks and jeeps, buses throwing up water and mud from their wheels.

There was an air of excitement everywhere under the lowering sky, the soggy air full with the threat of rain.

They were conquerors of Samotlor, the new *conquistadores* of a new wilderness, finding and opening a new El Dorado for socialism. For instance, Victor Vassilyevich Kitayev had come from Kuibyshev on the Volga eleven years ago when the call had gone out to open the Samotlor oilfields.

'I got into this oil thing by accident,' he said, introducing us to his companions on the oil rig. 'At first I tried electronics, but didn't succeed, so I chose oil, and here I am. It was fate, I suppose.'

His companions were grease-stained, grinning men in hardhats and padded oil-stained clothes. They took me along wooden catwalks and around the drill shaft and showed me where the crude oil came out into the pipeline.

'Down there, underground, the earth is pretty hard in spite of all the mud and water you see. It must be frozen solid. So they invented a special drill-bit out of a new alloy.' It took seven months to strike here.

They were friendly but tough men who often worked in sub-zero conditions: 50 or 60 degrees below. 'The inventors thought up a special electrically heated suit too,' one of them said. 'But it was too bulky and clumsy, so we put it aside and usually wear ordinary gear.' They would pump hot air down the well and it would come back as they worked, warming the air to −5 or −6 degrees.

There was a young girl who sat at a console in a big room where computers checked the production of each well, registering its output, or tracing any faults. She was Tanya Galeva, aged 23 years.

'How did you get here?' I asked.

'My husband brought me,' she said jokingly. 'I had to stay because he's here, but I like it.'

She explained that once the well had been drilled and automated, it was operated from the office. She simply sat there with switches and flickering lights and punched a button and a ticker-tape started to work as the computer counted the number of litres coming from that well at that very moment or a flashing light told if there was

something wrong at a particular well, and she demonstrated, smiling at us as if to say: 'You see, it's as easy as all that.' She and her husband were from the Bashkir Autonomous Republic.

And a Comrade Nikolai, who was in charge of a station that pumped water into empty wells, I think, to move any left-over oil towards other wells. Tanya is his wife's cousin and he got into oil business at the age of 18, ten years ago. He had been at Samotlor three years now and had graduated from technical school.

And Comrade Sharipov, the deputy head of the central collecting point where, apparently, all the lines from the wells came together and then joined the main pipeline, taking oil to the refineries practically all over the USSR.

We were in the local lorry repair works and there was a young figure working behind goggles with an acetylene torch. When the manager beckoned, the torch was switched off, the dark goggles lifted and there was a youthful female face smiling prettily at us from under the greasy beret as she came over in her padded overalls: 'My name is Lyuda,' she said. 'Welder.'

'And why did you come to this wet and dreary place?' I asked.

'Why, we have to conquer this Samotlor—we need it,' she replied, smiling. 'My husband and I, we have been here only one year, but we don't want to leave now.' She had a child who was looked after at the kindergarten.

Galina Vassilyevna, who repaired lorry engines and was a qualified mechanic, examined the big Tatra trucks from Czechoslovakia as they moved along giant conveyor belts. The territory played havoc with trucks and the mechanics were kept busy all the time. This Galina was burly and strong and she knew her engines.

All the time we were in the jeep, traversing most of the Samotlor oilfields, and we were planning to get a helicopter for an aerial view, but the crews unfortunately said, No, there was too much strong wind and they were not prepared to risk the safety of a foreign writer.

So instead we went to meet Comrade Victor Filatov who was deputy chairman of the town Soviet and he took

us around. 'The population is growing all the time. Twenty thousand arrive and only about a thousand give up and leave. By 1980, we will have about 130,000 people here. They're a motley group from all over, all volunteers. Before the town was built there was a village of Khanty-Mansi folk here. Many of them gave up their traditional hunting and fishing to enter the oil industry. They all stay on, in spite of the weather and hard conditions in winter.' He chuckled. 'They even turn out for the November 7 parade and you can imagine how cold it can be–the worst sufferers are those on the viewing stand!'

A Boat Ride

While at Nizhnevartovsk, we stayed at a pretty little hotel just outside the city. It had a Siberian log exterior and inside there was everything a hotel needed, neat and cosy. It did not look big enough for the tourist trade, but was probably temporarily being used for visitors. Apart from two other men, it seemed that Georgi and I were the only guests for a while. The food was simple but substantial. I have not acquired a taste for *pelmeni* which is like (but not quite) Italian ravioli: tiny square pastries stuffed with minced meat and eaten with a sauce.

Then as an intermission in our visit, they arranged a boat ride down–or was it up?–the river. I was surprised to discover that the town lay on the banks of the Ob. When we were ready to go I was more surprised to meet the man from the TV I had met in Tyumen. He was escorting two Cubans. So we all went down to the boat-harbour on the river and boarded a little craft which, I suppose, was a tugboat. While we waited to set off, all kinds of mysterious cartons were being brought aboard, and there were a couple of other journalists with us too, and they passed around some anti-mosquito lotion.

At last we set out on the grey river. There was no sign of rain and though it proved cold, the intention was to have a picnic on one of the little river islands. The mosquitoes did not mind the lotion and had other ideas about the picnic, and on a little islet which we tried they became

overaggressive, so we decided to hold the party in the cabin below decks. We all somehow squeezed into its tiny confines and the table was laid with the contents of the cartons, which proved to be food, tomatoes, cucumbers, vodka and cognac.

It was a very squashed-up but gay party, and I tried my bad Spanish on the two Cuban comrades though they spoke English too, and we chugged merrily along the river.

The Bashkirs

Apart from Baku, a good many of the oil workers at Samotlor seemed to have come from Bashkiria. Among them was Grigory Petrov. A tough-looking and kindly man in a navy-blue suit pinned with medals when he came to visit us at our little hotel. He had big hands and looked the kind of man who, a little younger, could be what, in slang, is called a 'wild-catter', one of those rough-neck oil drillers seen on the screen.

'But I was born on a farm,' he said in the dining-room. 'My father was a farm worker and he also kept the farm's accounts. We had four children in our family, I am one of the two sons, my brother is down in Surgut, also in oil.'

We had a little beer and he told how he had to go to school to the eighth grade and then to a technical school for oil workers and was in the oil industry 25 years and now a chief driller. 'My wife's a nurse at the kindergarten. We have two little ones too, you know, fourteen and eleven, at school.'

'Go on, eat up,' I said. 'You left Bashkiria to come here?'

'Well, the whole brigade came up here from Bashkiria,' he said. 'We came with our families, those who were married. At first we lived in tents; you see the town hadn't been built yet.' Now he lived in a four-roomed flat in a nine-storey building.

'My wife had some doubts at first, when we decided to move from Bashkiria, you know, but now she has no regrets. It was hard living in a tent while the town was being

built.' He had been elected leader of the brigade in the Bashkirian fields when the former leader retired. He was from Baku. 'We have a Ukrainian, a Tatar, another Bashkirian, a Russian and a German in our brigade.'

I asked about the medals. He was a little embarrassed about them. As I heard it he was given the Order of Lenin for results by his brigade fulfilling the five-year plan. He also had the Gold Star of Hero of Socialist Labour for 1973. The whole brigade received a personal message from Leonid Brezhnev. He also had a gold medal for teaching others the trade.

His brigade had been the first in the Soviet Union to drill a total of 100,000 metres in one year. The average was about 60 to 70 thousand, and their original plan had been 70,000.

'I take it you like your work then,' I said teasingly. 'You've endured well.'

'It's hard, but I enjoy it.' They could retire at 55 years if they wished. 'One might think that one well is like another, but it isn't.' He smiled. 'Every oil well is like a different woman, each has her own whims and fancies. But as for our brigade, we work well together. Let me tell you, you know they had to take us out by helicopter to the site and drop us off, and there was this youngster who wanted to join us. We took him along, but when the helicopter was hovering over the site he was too scared to jump out. After a lot of arguing and cursing we simply threw him overboard. He is still with us, and he has won some medals too.'

'Aren't there many accidents?'

He shook his head. 'No, very few. That's one thing we lack, accidents. Strict safety regulations and being careful all the time. No chances are taken. In all my years I know of only one incident, and it wasn't very serious.'

Oil drillers earn somewhat more than the ordinary workers, beside retiring early: that is because of the severe conditions of work. An ordinary oil driller earned an average of 650 rubles a month, Petrov as a top hand took 950 to one thousand. Holidays? 'Well, we might go down to the Black Sea. Last year we bought a car and toured the European part of the Soviet Union. We trav-

elled 15,000 kilometres, starting from Tyumen. We got sixty days' leave. This time we intend to go to Cuba.'

He wasn't just a hard-working oilman. He served on the Tyumen region Soviet, on the trade union committee and was a member of the Party Committee of Nizhnevartovsk.

'A full life,' I said.

'And a happy one,' he said.

We shook hands and I said I didn't have any awards to give him, but I presented him with my badge of the South African Congress of Trade Unions.

Here Comes the Bride

Before we left Nizhnevartovsk we went to the Palace of Weddings. The marriage officer welcomed us; she was a pleasant woman in a smart mauve suit and was glad to show me around before the ceremonies–there were two about to take place. There was a room where the brides could adjust their make-up and a reception-room if any party wanted toasting.

When the first party arrived she was standing at her desk, smiling. A record player sounded Mendelssohn's Wedding March and the couple advanced down the hall followed by the witnesses, parents and guests. The bride, in white gown and veil–they do not cover their face, only the head–looked a little tense, but smiled bravely. The bridegroom in a dark suit and his hair cropped, had mud on his shoes from the street.

The marriage officer came to the front of her desk and read the Soviet law on weddings to them. Then she passed forward a cutglass bowl in which the rings had been placed and the couple exchanged them. The officer wished them happiness, family love and many children. Then they signed the necessary papers and were man and wife. The marriage officer told me afterwards that the bride was a house painter and the groom a building worker–romance in the building industry. The next couple both worked in the oil industry. 'They are all usually between 20 and 22 years old,' the marriage officer told me.

Both parties had gone into the reception-room and she took me in to introduce me to them. The room was full of beaming parents, guests, the bridal couple and friends, all surrounding tables loaded with champagne and *zakuski.* These arrangements could be made beforehand. My guide told them who I was and most of what he knew about my past. One of the grooms wanted me to tell about experiences in South Africa's various prisons.

'That's no subject for a wedding,' I smiled. Instead I wished them all good health and asked them to be good citizens, and the old folks nodded gravely.

They wanted me to accompany them on their customary drive to the memorial obelisk out in the oilfields and then to the main celebrations. I was sorry to decline, because I had a plane to catch back to Tyumen. But it was a very happy end to my trip to Samotlor.

Farewell to Siberia

The last night in Tyumen we spent in the restaurant, reminiscing over the Boeuf Stroganoff, while the band played a rather rowdy version of *All of Me* and then changed to national songs, while the couples danced between the tables. The waitress asked if a man could share our table and we complied, of course. He was joined by two stout women, one of whom turned out to be a state insurance official. The band played *Street* which reminded me of Novosibirsk.

That day we had been down to Yalutorovsk, which is another historical town. There the Russian armies had withstood the invading Mongols. Apart from that it was where many of the Decembrist exiles had spent their last days: the revolutionary nobles and officers who in 1825 had turned against tsarist autocracy. Of the 131 convicted 88 were sentenced to penal servitude and five were hanged. Some of them were buried in the churchyard in Yalutorovsk, a quite little country town that conjured up such names as Prince Obolensky, Muravyov-Apostol and others; and the poet Pushkin sending them a message:

Deep in Siberia's mines, let naught
Subdue your proud and patient spirit.

Your crushing toil and lofty thought
Shall not be wasted–do not fear it.

There was also the 1921 monument to the victims of the kulak uprising to restore the old tsarist order.

The streets were mostly named after the Decembrists. Muravyov-Apostol (or was it Yakushkin?) had opened the first school for girls in Siberia; Prince Obolensky had married a peasant woman. You could hear all about it at the Decembrists museum there.

And so I had said good-bye to Siberia. The plane from Tyumen stopped in Ufa in Bashkiria, the supplier of so many oilmen to the north, to Nizhnevartovsk, a dark-green country, lakes gleaming in the sunlight like mirrors.

Ulyanovsk

At the airport a lone man stood by the arrival gate, holding a bunch of gladioli, as the other passengers passed him.

'I bet the flowers are for us,' I said.

They were. As we approached he came out and welcomed us to Ulyanovsk and handed the bouquet to me. He was Vladimir, Vladimir Pyrkov, and we walked from the 'arrivals', while waiting passengers gazed curiously at us: one supposed they wondered what one lone delegate this was.

V. I. Lenin had been born in Ulyanovsk. Across from the hotel is the Lenin Memorial Centre, all white Karelian marble, cubist in design, enclosing three houses of the old Russian style where Vladimir Ilyich Ulyanov came into the world and spent his childhood; the museum is full of the pictures of the old revolutionaries and comrades of V. I. Lenin: Y. M. Sverdlov, Sergo Orjonikidze, M. I. Kalinin, Madame A. M. Kollontai with whom my father had danced at a ball in Moscow in 1927. The ultra-modern setting does not reduce the drama of that past of which Lenin had been the centre; the old Party documents, the signed letters, the faded newspapers and pamphlets; moustached men who had attended conferences.

A crowd of schoolchildren gathered around the en-

trance to a tile and mosaic hall that held the white granite statue of Lenin symbolically by the Volga. The attendant generously lifted the restraining rope, so I could go in and examine the intricate pattering of the walls. Here all the local ceremonies of initiation were held–the presentation of awards, admission to the Young Pioneers, the Komsomol, all the zeal and sentiment that softened the severe edges of dialectical materialism, that helped emphasise its humanism, perhaps.

Outside it rained suddenly and we had to hurry across the tramlines. Beyond the modernistic Memorial Complex still lay some of the old Simbirsk (the city's former name) of 'Sleep and Quiet', the merchant town on the Volga. Here also in 1648, it had been a fortress against invaders; here the ghost of Stenka Razin might still slide down the river. When the Ulyanovs had lived there it was 72 Moskovskaya Street, only now it is Lenin Street, and the house is occupied by the public library; and Lev Tolstoy Street used to be the Pokrovskaya where the family had lived from 1879 to 1887.

At the Lenin School No. 1 a young bespectacled pupil, Lyuda, in a neat apron and red scarf and from the seventh grade, took charge of me. With the aid of a pointer, she took me through the rooms full of the memories of Lenin's schooldays: the desk where he sat, the record of his progress while attending that school, the name of Ulyanov, Vladimir Ilyich, on the roster of former pupils.

At one time, we were accompanied by a guide of our own, so we could avoid the crush of tourists, German and British. His name was Yuri and he spoke a sort of guidebook English, as if he were a little nervous about slipping into ordinary speech. It sounded somewhat quaint: '. . .the fur coat presented to him by his father . . . in exile he often put it on. . .' or '. . .the mother traversed that arduous path. . .', while explaining how Madame Ulyanova had visited her son Alexander in prison, condemned for plotting against the tsar.

When the rain let up, we walked downhill through a park and along streets to the banks of the Volga. From the walled embankment with the tall statue of Lenin, you could see across the wide river all the way to the bluffs

opposite, orange in the sunlight and topped with green. At the dock the riverboats from Moscow were moored, white and clean and meant for easy, relaxed travelling. You can sail all the way down from Moscow to Rostov-on-Don, though I myself have never made the trip.

But Ulyanovsk is also an industrial city. It makes electric motors, metal-cutting tools, and automobiles. It is a city with many splendid people, such as the engineering plant workers.

There were Alexander Shemyakin, who won the Order of Lenin for working out a scheme for advancing the time of production; and Mikhail Katz, whose father and uncle had been killed in the war and his grandparents murdered by the nazis; and Valentin Ivanovich Ratanov, who also lost his father to the invaders. 'If there had not been a war we might have done greater things.'

We had to leave for Moscow eventually. Georgi and I sat in a waiting-room at the airport. A woman who, I gathered, had been transported somehow to America during the war and had remained there, returning now to visit her former homeland was saying to her hosts: 'I like it here and if we have peace between your country and mine I would like to come back.' It sounded like a curious conversation. When we had to board, she said to the couple seeing her off: 'America is wonderful, we have lots of everything.' I wondered, walking to the plane in the airport lighting, what she had meant by 'everything'.

6. HARVEST HOME

The Byelorussky Railway Station had the usual atmosphere of railway terminals: the islands of baggage, the loaded barrows, the groups around the cigarette kiosks, the last-minute arrivals pushing their way through to catch the rear coach at least, before the whistles blew. A woman with a bag of oranges puffed like a steam engine through the entranceway; young people in summer casuals and haversacks shrieked with excitement. We made it fairly easily, although our carriage was far down the train to Vilnius: the motors of the locomotive were humming and the grey-uniformed women waited at the carriage steps. Soviet railways seem to be run by women; at least they blew the whistles, waved the flags, slammed doors and administered the journey, attended to the restaurant cars, probably, they were locomotive engineers too.

A young *devushka* in the grey railway uniform examined our tickets and showed us where our sleeper was. In front of our compartment a man who would share it with us was already sitting on the tip-up seat in the corridor, reading a Nero Wolfe detective story in the English language. The doors were slamming and we were off, dragging slowly along the station, out into the yards which looked like any in the world of railroads except for the Cyrillic alphabet signs, the wheels clack-clacked below us and the blocks of flats in the distance passed from view, a frieze of cranes along the Moskva River and the city skimmed back out of sight as we gathered speed.

I prefer trains to aeroplanes–perhaps, I am secretly terrified of those giant birds, wondering how on earth they managed to keep us in the sky. But you can ponder in comfort in a train, stretch out on a bunk or gaze through the window and watch *terra firma* pass by, the buildings, fields, smoke in the distance like Amerindian signals, faraway villages, mountains, life; time meant

nothing, you need not hurry. In the Soviet Union the best train journeys I had made had been to Samarkand and once to Leningrad and Kiev.

A woman brought the bedding. There was another man besides the Nero Wolfe fan, who shared the compartment with us, but I saw little of him. The countryside swept past to the sound of quiet music from the radio fixed somewhere in the compartment.

You have to take your chance in the restaurant car on Soviet trains, it is a matter of first come, first served. We waited among the tables and crates of beer—now I knew where the *pivo* went that one found so difficult to acquire at hotels.

The first stop was Gagarin, the birthplace of the late cosmonaut. In the morning, when we were awakened by the young lady in charge of the carriage, the radio was broadcasting the 7 a.m. news and Byelorussia was passing by outside, flat and green, farmhouses and barns, a woman leading a cow in a field. The *devushka* of the Soviet railways brought us *chai* from the samovar that boils over a coalfire at the end of each carriage. The flat green fields swayed by and we were crossing into Lithuania, but the landscape took no notice of borders and did not change—after all it is all the USSR.

Three Thousand Lakes

The narrow end of Lithuania in the west bumps into the Baltic Sea, between Byelorussia and Latvia, and looking carefully at its map, it looks a little like a squashed version of the African continent. There is a horn in the east that looks like the shape of the coastline of the Red Sea and Somalia, and to the west Klaipeda might be Dakar. But this is the Western edge of the USSR. 'You must see one of our Western republics,' my hosts said. 'It will round off the trip, sort of achieve balance. . . .'

Lithuania is called the land of three thousand lakes. The country has no dizzy peaks, precipitous cliffs, only ranges of softly undulating hills, forests that cover one-quarter of the territory, and the quiet Niemen River, which is close to the Lithuanians as the Volga is to the Russians, the Mississippi to the Americans.

In the far past the Roman Tacitus wrote about the Asiatic tribes living on the coast of the Baltic Sea. The name Lithuania also occurs in writings of the 11th century. The first half of the 13th century, under the Grand Duke Mindaugas, witnessed the emergence of a centralised Lithuanian state, and for two hundred years they fought side by side with Poles and Russians against the invaders of the Teutonic and Livonian Orders. At the end of the 18th century, the country was attached to the Russian Empire, and though the economic relations with Russia favoured the development of industry and the growth of towns, the national aspirations of the Lithuanian people were cruelly suppressed by the tsarist autocracy. Together with the other peoples of the Russian Empire Lithuanians rose time and again against oppression, fighting for national and social independence. The victory of the October Revolution in Russia had a great effect on the revolutionary movement in Lithuania, then occupied by the Kaiser's army. In December 1918, Lithuanian workers and peasants rose in revolt and proclaimed a Soviet republic, but by 1919 the foreign interventionists who backed the reactionary elements succeeded in crushing the young socialist state. A regime of terror and suppression followed, especially after the coup d'état of 1926, which introduced a fascist-type dictatorship. In the historic summer of 1940, the socialist revolution once more swept away the reactionary regime and on July 21 of that year the People's Seimas (Parliament) proclaimed Lithuania a Soviet Socialist Republic and in August it was accepted into the USSR. The new life was again interrupted by the Hitlerite invasion, until in 1945 the Soviet Army whose ranks included the Lithuanian Division liberated the country, and for the first time in history all Lithuanian lands were united in the Lithuanian state.

Old and New

In the foyer of the Hotel Gintaras in Vilnius, local people waited with bouquets and tapestry scarves for relations who were about to arrive on visits from America. During the period of reaction thousands of Lithuanians

had emigrated to settle abroad, and nowadays they or their children make a point of returning to their native home, if not to stay for good, at least to look and see, to touch the soil, tread the old streets. Tearful reunions took place around us, receptions, hugs, kisses, the twang of the new-found North American accent mingling with the Lithuanian. A custom seemed to be to decorate the old relation with the embroidered sash or scarf. The decorative art of Lithuanian woman artists includes the famous tapestry work. The women of Lithuania have been weaving since time immemorial and the process of preparing the flax or wool for weaving took up much of the women's time, so that poetry and popular song actually arose out of this occupation. To this day in some villages it is the custom for a bride to present all wedding guests with linen gifts woven with her own hands. Modern artists owe their ability to harmonise contrasts of dark and light, smooth, rough, close and open work to the ancient craft of their ancestors. The refined colours in tapestries spring from the ancient ability to make natural dyes from flowers, leaves, roots and bark and metal ores.

Now even parcels in modern stores in Vilnius, I found, are tied with embroidered tape instead of ordinary string.

From this association with colour also, I daresay, springs the famous stained-glass work of Lithuanian artists, in both their formal and modern designs. It is impossible not to be attracted by the blaze of Lithuanian stained-glass work, the gifts of the hands which stretch back to the 14th and 16th centuries, and the stained-glass work in Kaunas must be seen to be believed: *Mother Earth* by Stoškus, *Harvest Home* by Galeškas, *Spring* by Morkūnas.

Vilnius itself is a combination of old and new: the medieval city with its narrow cobbled streets and courtyards flanked and surrounded by old buildings, the archways casting shadows, the dim interiors of old inns and wine cellars, cafés. The nazis destroyed a lot of this, but the old city was built again as it had stood in the centuries-old past. You can still climb the hill to Gediminas Tower that overlooks Vilnius, pass under ancient gateways, rub against old city walls.

At the shrine of Mater Misericordiae Catholic old women knelt on the hard pavement to pray at matins and vespers in St. Anne's Cathedral. Over a medieval gateway an altar of gold is open to full view through plate glass so that the faithful who cannot get inside may pray before it in the street. The curious, like ourselves, climbed the narrow stairs to see it close up: religion's golden-wrought images are not interfered with, the Catholic Church continues in its old way as do others.

Around all this old history the new closes in; not only in the modern blocks of flats, the parks and hotels, but in industrial and agricultural development. In the Soviet period entirely new branches of industry came to life: instrument-making and machine-tool industries, radio and electrical engineering and electronics. Lithuania produces computers and electric meters, radio and TV sets, vacuum cleaners, car compressors, agricultural machinery and ship propellers.

In one of the squares we went to see an open-air production of Verdi's opera *Aida.* The whole front of a building, which we learned had been an army barracks, had been turned into a reproduction of ancient Egypt, all the colour and pomp of the opera was produced under the open sky. One evening we went to see an American film at one of the local cinemas–actually I had missed the film when it had been shown in London: *They Shoot Horses, Don't They?*

The Bells of Kaunas

The road to Kaunas wound through low hills and forests. Over a bridge a slogan proclaimed: 'The eternal friendship of all Soviet peoples is the foundation of all our achievements.' We went past the fields of yellow-green with the farmhouses in the distance, a red-brick church. Halfway to Kaunas lies the youngest town of Lithuania–Elektrenai. The biggest electrothermal power station in the Baltic republics went up here, and the surrounding town seemed to have been sparked off by its electricity.

According to old records, the Vilnius-Kaunas highway had been a very busy road as far back as the 14th centu-

ry, starting as a cobbled street in the latter town. The road had been pounded by the invading Teutonic Knights, the coaches of nobility and long caravans of merchants, people setting out on their way to other countries to escape intolerable hardship and oppression.

Now it is a broad, double-line motorway, and on our trip to Kaunas we had to slow down. A section of the road had been commandeered for a cycle race and the starting and finishing point was occupied by the judges and bustling officials. The grass verge on the roadside was scattered with spectators and men in track suits looking over their cycles.

Waved on, we eventually passed the distant clusters of pylons–common sights in the USSR–new brick cottages surrounded by fields, and drove into the old suburbs of Kaunas: narrow streets and brown and green wooden cottages with gardens, overhanging oak trees of the Green Hill district. One could see the new features advancing in: the cleared areas and the acres of flats going up in the Dainavos area.

Kaunas lies in the centre of Lithuania and is an important railway junction, the vortex of economic life. Kaunas' industrial production, apart from central heating boilers and ship's propellers, includes paper that is exported to–among other countries–Mongolia, Iran and Sri Lanka.

We entered the town; as in Vilnius the middle ages lay side by side with the modern and from old market places we went down Red Army Prospekt and Freedom Avenue.

In the Lithuanian language the Latin alphabet is used and you could read the signs easily: *Maisto produktai, Informatija.* It was Saturday morning and the streets were bustling with an almost Oriental fervour. But Asia is behind you now, Soviet Europe starts here, and the old architecture, Gothic, baroque or medieval, the former *Rat ūsha,* town hall, like a clenched hand and the tower like an extended and pointed thumb, the red-brick Perkūnas House with its Gothic top and slender columns poking at the sky; the Vytautas Church; these contrasting with the sleek tower of the History Museum and the drum-like Čiurlionis. But here too the old town is being

restored to its authenticity. You can see all this from the top of Aleksotas Hill, which you can climb by the stairway or use the funicular car.

By contrast with the holiday mood, we went to look at Fortress Number Nine. Built by the tsarist authorities originally, it became outdated despite the cost. So, it was then turned into a prison and from there began its notoriety: the victims of the fascist period of the 1920s, then came the nazis to kill a quota of 600 prisoners a day, Resistance fighters; a total of 80,000 dead. Besides, the gloomy dungeons, the iron cages, the damp and narrow tunnels, the torture rooms, all reminded me of the Roeland Street prison in Cape Town and the Fort of Johannesburg where I had spent some time. I was glad to get out. Of all those who had been put there, only 34 had escaped from it to join the anti-nazi partisans, the rest of them died. But one had to go and look at the monument to the victims of this horrid place. How much mourning does one do in a lifetime? The cause of human freedom extended far and wide; there was too much death.

It was better after our friends took us to lunch in one of those old, medieval taverns which had been frequented by hunters: carved doors, great hearths, stag heads mounted on the walls, the long heavy tables and high-back chairs, the beamed ceilings. On top of the hearty meal, there was a marvellous *kvas* spiced with aniseed.

Then there is the Čiurlionis gallery dedicated to this artist and composer who died at the age of 36–the gallery full of his weird symbolism and surrealistic fantasies. Did the 400 canvases he had painted represent a subconscious progressiveness, had he been deranged, a degenerate artistic genius? The arguments did not rage, but were whispered from picture to picture in the subdued tones reserved for galleries and museums. He had produced as many musical compositions as pictures, and one imagined him somewhere nearby, straining to catch the murmured debates, smiling slyly over some foolishness.

Kaunas seemed full of surprises. Next we went to look at the collection of devils. You need not be a follower of

the devil, of course, but it is something to behold, this collection.

It appeared that at one time there had been this rich man–his name had slipped from my notes–who had devoted most of his life and money to buying, from all over the world practically, effigies, dolls, figurines, of His Majesty Beelzebub. They are all there now in glass cases: dolls, dolls, dolls; the devil in porcelain, the devil in clay, stone, wood, beautifully produced devils and crude devils; devils from Europe, Africa, Asia, the Indies, the Caribbean, devils from everywhere–fiends from France and Satans from Scandinavia, devils, devils all round. It must be the only collection in the world dedicated to the devil. Curiously enough, though I have been given to understand that the devil is connected with all kinds of sexual aberrations and ghastly rites, I saw no evidence of this among all the exhibits this strange man had collected for years from almost every part of the world. In any case, I have always considered the devil to be quite a respectable fellow, and always unjustly maligned.

Another feature of Kaunas is the ringing of the bells, or one should say the playing of bells, by the campanologist, 74-year-old Viktoras Cuprevičius. Crowds gathered in the little park and streets around as he mounted the tower–he is usually accompanied by his son whom he had taught, but this time he was solo. Everybody waited in fidgety suspense. It was a warm day, the sun bright everywhere, on the tower of the History Museum. Then, clear as–well–bells, the music tinkled, boomed and clanged across the square, the gardens, the town. A master musician of bells, and he played Tchaikovsky, Brahms, folk songs, the Italian *O Sole Mio* and his own *Happy Bells*: a concert of bell-ringing. Afterwards he came down to meet the waiting crowd that pushed around the tower door to greet him: a white-haired, lean and shy man who smiled at everybody and welcomed all strangers and hoped they'd enjoyed his performance. Kaunas is certainly full of surprises.

Pirčiupis' Mother

That Sunday we drove down to Trakai with its old castle on the lake. It was a long drive and on the way we turned off towards the Rũdininku forest area. On the way our driver made the mistake of overtaking another car on a bridge and there was the militia up ahead in their yellow squad car that some of the people call 'canaries', to wave us down.

The militiaman was very polite, salũting and saying, 'Good morning, comrades.' He called the driver out and said something about there being traffic laws in this republic that had to be obeyed. After this lecture he let us go on. You can get your licence clipped by the militia and after three clippings you have a lot of explaining to the traffic authorities and they might make you do your driving examinations all over again. In serious cases, of course, they might suspend a driver for a period, or for good. But the militia on the whole are never harsh and I never heard anybody refer to them as the equivalent of 'fuzz' or 'pigs' or 'scuffers', as the police are called in some countries. Once I asked a friend to warn a slightly tipsy man on the street and the man laughed and said, 'No, no, they're alright. They are *our* militia, people's militia.' Once I even proposed a toast to the militia–but one cannot push one's luck too far. Another friend told me: 'Why, if we had no militia we wouldn't be able to read or write our own detective stories!'

We drove on to the Rũdininku area, and came on the site where the old village of Pirčiupis had stood–the Lithuanian Lidice. In the summer of 1944, the nazis had swept down on it and mercilessly burnt down the whole village and all its 119 inhabitants with it. In the nearby museum one saw the relics of such barbarism, kept as reminder of man's inhumanity to man: the charred remnants of coats, a burnt shoe, a belt buckle, a bent and blackened fork, bridle bits, a bible with a bullet hole. One was aghast at the ravages of fascism, preserved under glass in the little museum.

Over all this stood the very sad statue of a mourning Lithuanian woman called simply *Mother;* a masterpiece

of sorrow, the inspired monument sculptured by the Lithuanian, Gediminas Jokubonis, who was awarded the Lenin Prize for this work. All over the Soviet Union stand the symbols of sadness over its lost children.

Trakai's Castle

The driver dropped us off at the lakeside resort and had to return to Vilnius. We would make our own way back. It was hot and pleasant and the massed trees around the lake cast a pleasant shadowiness, while all over the water launches putt-putted and youths punted and rowed to the shrieks of merriment.

In the middle of the lake rose the castle of Trakai, like something out of a children's fairy-tale or a Walter Scott novel: battlements, towers, barbicans, portcullis, walls and gatehouse, drawbridge and central keep. It was one of those castles out of fiction, but it was real enough, having withstood the Teutonic invaders and the rampaging Knights of the Cross who used to be called 'Crusaders'. Boyhood crept up on me–Quentin Durward, Ivanhoe–as we crossed the long wooden causeway and crossed the drawbridge. The rest of the hundreds of sightseers followed like advancing men-at-arms: one expected to hear the clank of armour, the twang of crossbows.

Nobody resisted the invasion. We bought our tickets and explored inner baileys and outer, courtyards and fortifications, climbed narrow staircases inside round towers and walked along the battlements where guards had once looked out across the water and called the hourly 'All's well'.

We had lunch in the local tourist restaurant at a table on a balcony shared with what appeared to be a courting couple: they whispered together and avoided our eyes. Down below parties were singing at tables. After that we lazed by the shore of the lake, wandered under the trees, killing time before the folk-dance concert back at the castle.

The Liandies Muzikos Teatro Trupe performed a programme of folk songs and dances, all decked out in the

traditional clothes of old Lithuania. Performed in one of the great halls of the castle, the concert was in perfect setting.

At the Trakai bus station we waited with the crowd going back to Vilnius and other parts. Everybody seemed to have had a jolly day out, evidenced by the condition of several husbands who were being admonished by their wives. 'You were supposed to have come fishing,' a woman told her unsteady spouse. 'Well, I did intend to,' he replied. There is always a scramble to get aboard–co-operation broke down; it was every man for himself. We were packed in like caviar in a jar and the bus crew didn't seem to bother about the carrying capacity of the vehicle. That is one thing about Soviet buses, they hardly ever leave anybody behind.

To Die a Little

We had our last drinks of ale in the underground drinking cellar in the old city, brought by a lad dressed like a medieval cellarman. We had visited the old Peter and Paul Cathedral with its intricate plasterwork and basreliefs in thousands of designs and patterns, while from the middle of the cupola of the ceiling God looked down at the marble checkered floor, and the altar shone all gold and silver. At the Young Communist League offices, I was received by young men and stunning girls and one of the stunning girls was the second secretary or something Comrade Rudakova, who presented me with flowers and the recorded speech of L. I. Brezhnev to the Komsomol congress. I had visited the local newspaper *Tiesa* and met the editor Albertas Laurinčiukas, and they had published my Vietnamese short story *Thang's Bicycle* in their Sunday edition. We had visited another old tavern where Prosper Merimée had drunk–that occasion would have come under literary adventures.

Vilnius is an old centre of book printing. As far back as the 16th century the first Lithuanian and Slavonic-Russian books had been printed there. The book has become an everyday requisite in Lithuania today. And among all the thousands of books printed (there are 7,000 libra-

ries holding 50 million volumes) there must be some from other parts of the world. I browsed at a second-hand bookstall, and there was *Akmens Salis* by Aleksis La Guma. It was *The Stone Country*, translated into Lithuanian. I have it now in my bookcase, a touching reminder of the last days of my Soviet journey, like the one wooden shoe presented to me in Vilnius–a custom which means you are invited to return to collect the other.

Epilogue

The question was, what had one gathered? In material acquirements I had a *dombra* from Kazakhstan, a horn carving from the Blue Mountains, an Uzbek tea-set, various Oriental robes and sashes from Asiatic villages where I had been welcomed, a collection of *tyubeteikas*, a wooden shoe from Lithuania. I felt like a member of a caravan returning from the Orient, only the whine of jet engines had taken the place of camel bells; the customs at London Airport did not bother this time, but waved me on.

We are the Pilgrims, master; we shall go
Always a little further; it may be
Beyond that last blue mountain barred with snow,
Across that angry or that glimmering sea....

I had not gone in search of that mysterious 'Russia's soul', but to see socialism at work. Did socialism mean that shrill tourist voice crying: 'Thank goodness they have hairspray!' The queues of women in GUM store at Moscow waiting patiently to get an imported folding umbrella? The Russo-American woman in Ulyanovsk Airport saying, 'America is wonderful, we have lots of everything.'

Since I first went to the Soviet Union living standards have risen substantially, and all appearances are that they will continue to do so. The general quality of life is improving. Over the last five years wages and salaries, pensions and student allowances had all increased, gathered, against a background of completely stable prices. In that time real incomes per head had gone up by 24 per cent. The funds made available for the free education and health services, etc., had grown even more noticeably, by nearly 40 per cent. In that period the housing conditions of 56 million people had improved.

It had never been my intention to bother with statistics, they are boring and seldom understood. A million unemployed in the West does not mean a million individuals,

it means a million members of families. But one cannot avoid statistics, no matter how one tries to sidestep them, they are there like the crowds at the panorama view of Borodino, or the Moscow Circus. There is no unemployment in the Soviet Union; instead there are signs everywhere asking for more labour for some particular enterprise. Students do not walk the streets or play guitars in the Metro tunnels for pennies to augment their livelihood. There are no squatters movements and no charitable institutions for battered mothers.

State of the People

Under socialism the state exists to serve the people, and things are made to serve man, and man through the state arranges to make the things he wants and needs, to make them for his use. Goods are not produced for some individual's profit. In the capitalist world people may need better transport, housing, denim jeans and lipstick, but if there's no profit in it the consumer has just to do without. The aim of socialism is to put out goods the people need, but they build first things needed first. Hospitals and schools, blocks of flats and transport, the basic things man really needs, but denims, lipstick, folding umbrellas must come later if they are not there already. And all Soviet citizens–from a street sweeper to a minister of state–live on the wages, or salaries, on the money they have worked for.

It can happen under socialism that there are shortages, but all economies have shortages. The difference is how goods are divided; when in capitalist countries goods are in short supply, the prices go up and only the well-off can buy them. In the Soviet Union prices remain stable and it's a matter of first come, first served. Of course, there are people too, under socialism, who start buying things for the sake of buying, but they are more likely to be laughed at than admired.

It all comes down to what one has and what one makes rationally. People need a flat or a house at a rent they can afford (in the Soviet Union rents are a mere 4 to 5 per cent of the family income), the chance to eat and dress

well and to spend their leisure time in cultural pursuits. These must be available to all, without exception. This removes all social inequality, which is the goal of socialism, and it fosters in people the sense of real values and sham ones.

The Communist Party

And one imagines the Communist Party of the Soviet Union and its officials, the smiling men and women in their neat clothes, in the offices with the polished desks and vases used for pencils, implementing all this. But neither Marx nor Lenin invented the principle of the Party guidance of the state; no one invented this principle which emerged rather as a natural product of historical evolution and as the only means by which the ruling classes defend their power. While states, any states, exist, they are run by parties that express the will of the classes in power.

Guidance by the Communist Party does not mean the practical management of state affairs, the tasks of the Soviets. The Soviets comprise over two million members and have 30 million volunteer assistants. All social groups and all nations and nationalities in the USSR are represented in these organs of state power–from the Supreme Soviet to the local village Soviet. The programme of the Communist Party adopted in 1919 said: 'The functions of the Party collectives should by no means duplicate those of the organs of state power which the Soviets are. . . . It is through the Soviets that decisions are implemented. The Party tries to guide the activities of the state rather than duplicate them.

In the guidelines of the five-year plans, as adopted by Party congresses, is the basis for the decisions drawn up by the USSR and the republican governments. After thorough consideration by committees of the Supreme Soviets of the USSR and of the individual constituent republics, these decisions are endorsed or amended by sessions of the bodies of power, and thus become law. The Party may intervene in current policies whenever necessary, but such intervention is by no means a right to rescind

orders issued by organs of power and administration, to infringe upon legal democratic procedures. The Party acts in conformity with and not in defiance of established laws, and publicly poses the key problems of current policies, explaining their urgency and significance to the public and suggesting ways of solving them.

But these are aspects which you find also unavoidable if you wish to view Soviet society seriously. Can a single journey of a few weeks reveal everything? How long does it take to memorise or write an encyclopaedia–it was not my intention to dissect the enormity of the Soviet Union.

The Cuban poet Domingo Alfonso:

People like me
Daily walk the streets,
Drink coffee, breathe,
Admire the 'sputniks'.

One wanted to touch, to feel, to smell even, in that way one would, perhaps, *see,* admire the *sputniks.* It was the blind learning Braille. "Truly, when a person is on a journey he learns many things, and he increases his knowledge.'

Swahili Salim Bin Abakari went to Russia in 1896, to the Russia of tsarism, and had peculiar and ugly things to report about that country. Today, with the same keen eye for facts, he would be amazed and gratified.

The Bull's Death

The October Revolution of 1917 was the opening of a new era in world history. Very well, if sceptics deny this, then let us take me, one of the millions in the developing countries, one of the victims of colonialism, national oppression and inequality.

There are about 2,000 nationalities in the world ranging from small tribes to nations numbering millions. As there are more than 150 states in the world, over 90 per cent of the nationalities are within multinational or multitribal states. About 1,600 nationalities live in the developing countries of Asia and Africa where the process of national consolidation and the formation of larger tribal

groups into nationalities is still under way. For instance, authorities say that in Nigeria alone there are up to 200 nationalities and tribes. One of the burdens these countries inherited from colonialism was strife between tribes and nations, hostility between individual developing countries. Millions of people still under colonialism struggle determinedly for national liberation.

About 100 different peoples live in the industrialised capitalist countries. In these countries, moreover, dozens of nations and nationalities are suffering from inequality, are rising against this 'civilised barbarism'.

In the socialist community there are about 250 peoples, including more than 100 nations and nationalities of the Soviet Union. I have seen them live with full rights and in fraternal co-operation. In different socialist countries, one admits, the national problem is at different stages of resolution. This historical process does not take place without difficulties, but taken as a whole, there has been spectacular progress in the socialist countries in the development of genuinely humane, really just national relations.

The united multinational Soviet state has shown to the whole world, no matter who wishes to deny it, the immense historical advantages of socialism over capitalism. It has proved able to solve, within a short period, the highly complex national question, to eradicate the economic, socio-political and ideological sources of social and national antagonism left behind by the erased society of exploiters, to secure friendship, reconciliation of nations and nationalities. The unity, all-round prosperity of all nations and nationalities have become an object law of socialism.

The capitalist system, disguised under the gaudy neonlit mask of 'the free world', 'the great society', 'Western civilisation', increasingly reveals its inability to free man from national oppression, racism, to remove antagonism, hatred and distrust between nations from the life of its society. To capitalism national oppression and racial antagonism are as expected as the exploitation of man by man, as the togas worn by the declining nobility at gladiatorial combats: the killing games are part of the picture, the

scene of the arena; it goes with the poised sword for the bull's death.

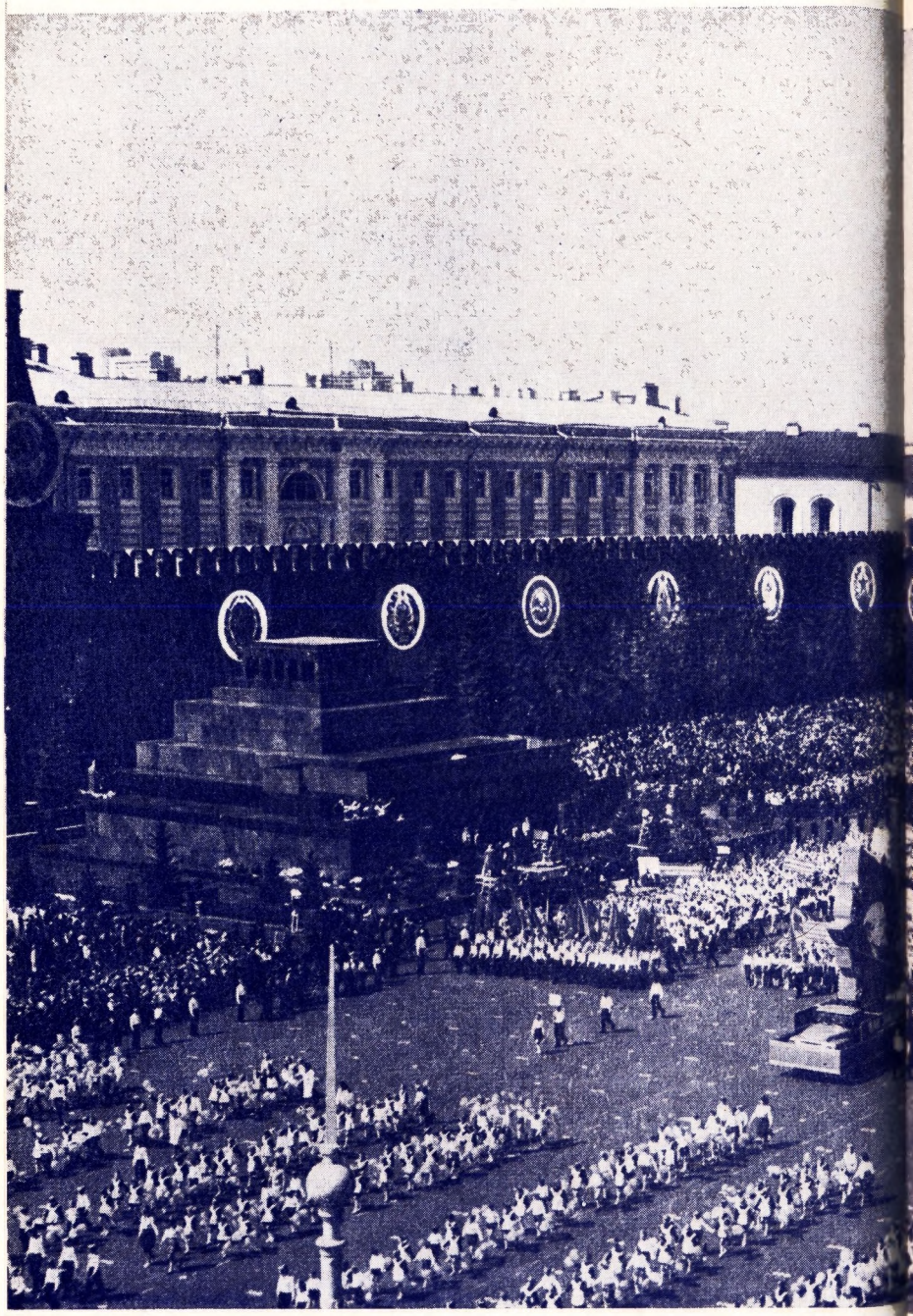
One could go on, there could be much more to say. But it is useless to repeat what has gone before; a saint does not reach heaven by merely reciting the established texts. One only wanted to find humanity as it should be. Has some objective been missed? In the process of meeting many friends one is apt to miss the onlookers, the outsiders. Young Masha and the charming children of the orphanage near Ulyanovsk, named after the war hero Alexander Matrosov? He had thrown his body across a loophole of a nazi pillbox to block their machine-gun fire and save his comrades, and young children honoured him for this deed. The Buryat opera bass? I think his name is Lhasaran Linkhovoin. In any case, when his only daughter had been killed in a car crash, it broke him too. But he had come back, climbing up out of sorrow and despair, to become once again the great singer of the Buryat Autonomous Republic, of the Soviet Union. It was like scenes out of the romantic novels, but it was actually life: those children, that operatic bass. What scenes had I missed? But the canvas is too vast; one cannot count each blade of grass on the steppe. You tried to think of everything you had forgotten to say, ask, seek. What should one set down, leave out? Perhaps a pot-pourri, a stew, has more variety than the single head of a sheep, boiled and steaming. 'Farewell' lay bitter on the tongue at each little airport, in each village square, at the foot of the many monuments to the dead of their Patriotic War. But there is consolation in the Kazakh proverb: 'Only he who has no friends cannot say good-bye'.

Impressions
of the
USSR
Series

MOSCOW

Red Square

St. Basil's Cathedral and the Kremlin's Spassky Tower

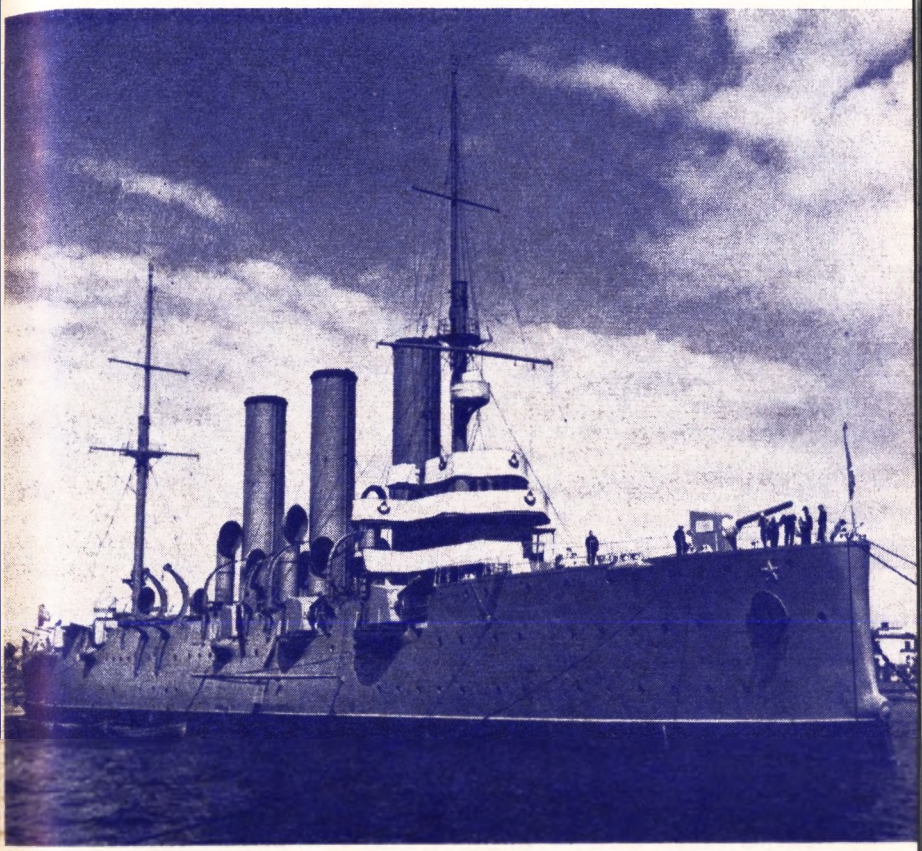


1922
1972

←

Festivities on Red Square on the 50th anniversary of the Young Pioneer Organisation

Pioneers on Red Square

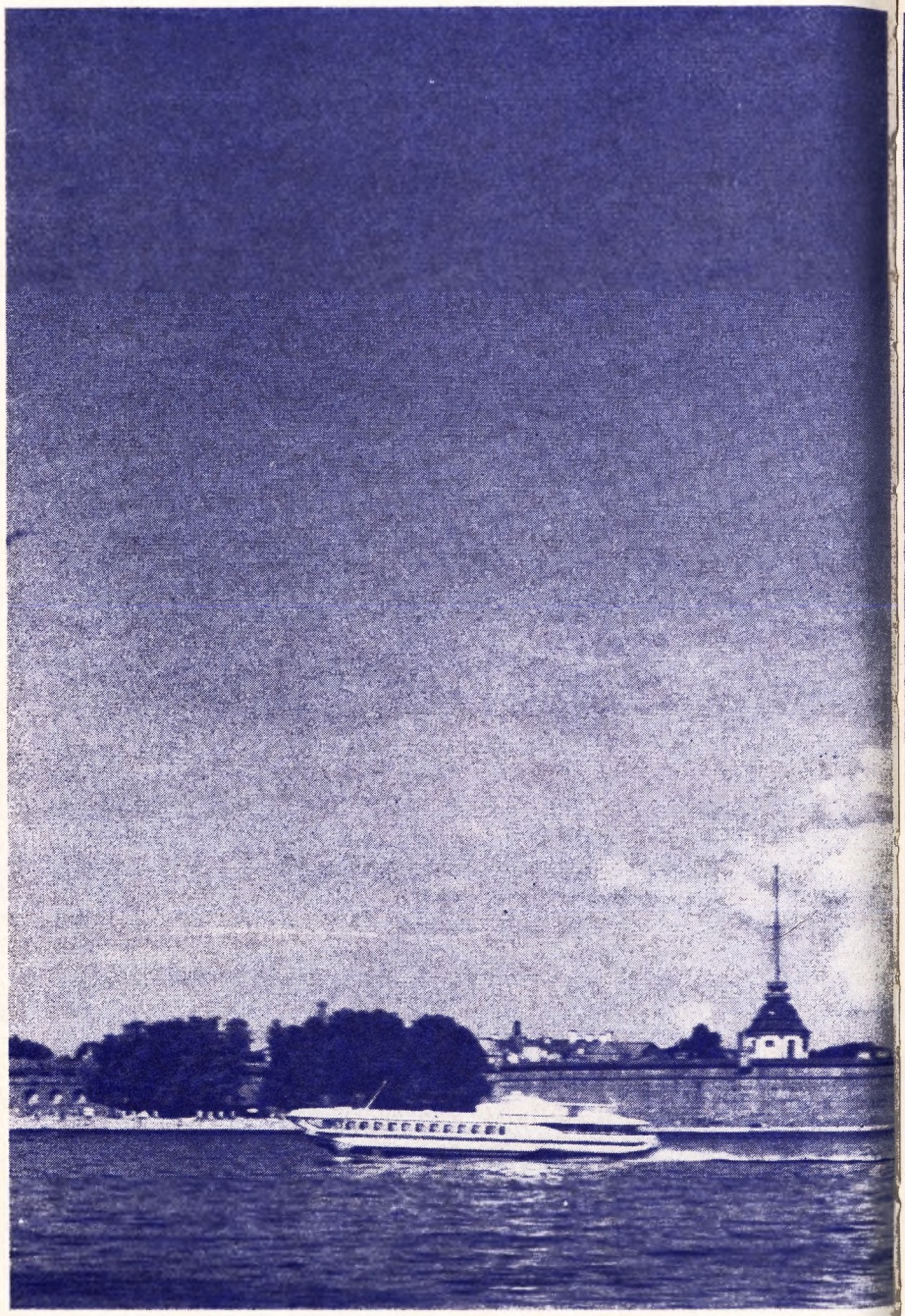


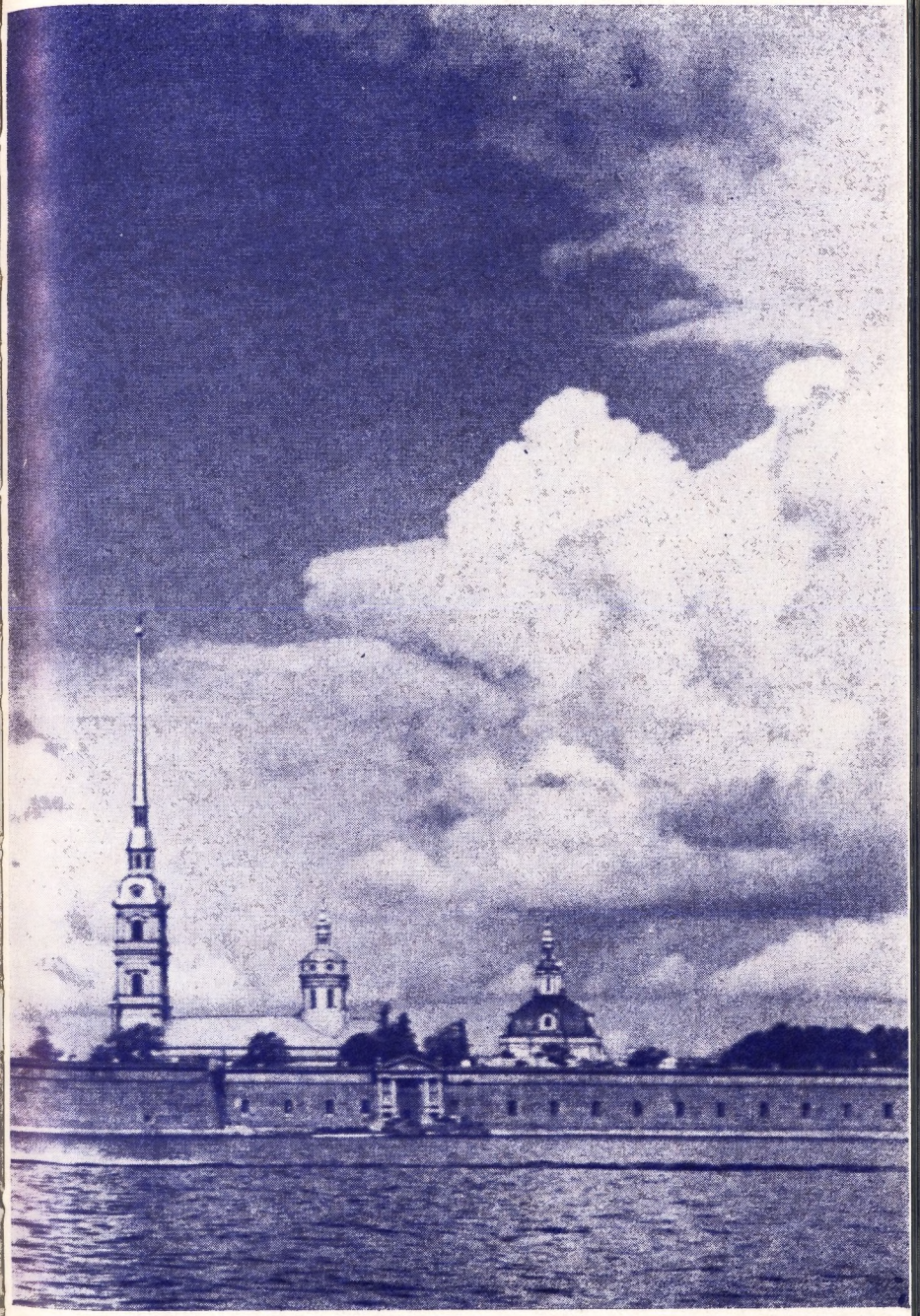
LENINGRAD

The cruiser *Aurora*

Petergof. Petrodvorets and fountains →

Peter and Paul Fortress, a view from the Neva →





Lenin Prospekt in Dushanbe →

The Aini Opera and Ballet House in Dushanbe

ДРУЖБА
НАРОДОВ

Dushanbe University

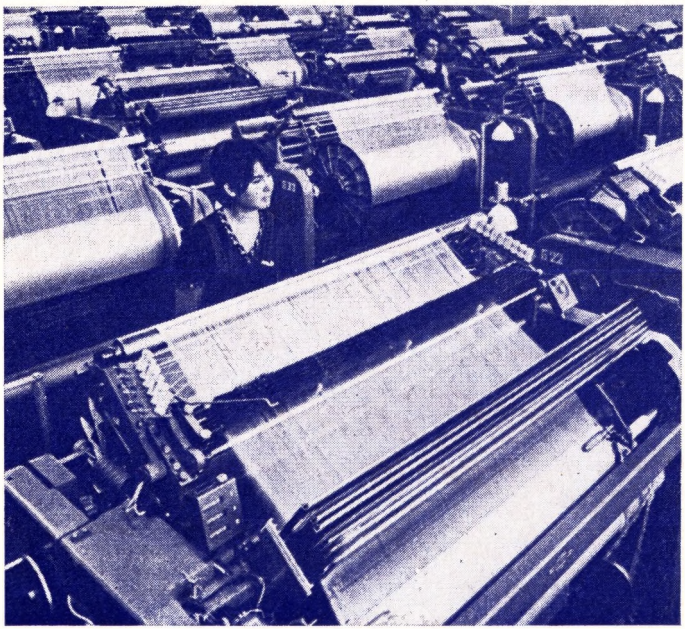
Tajik girls in national costume

Elder generation of the Nurek Hydroelectric Power Station builders

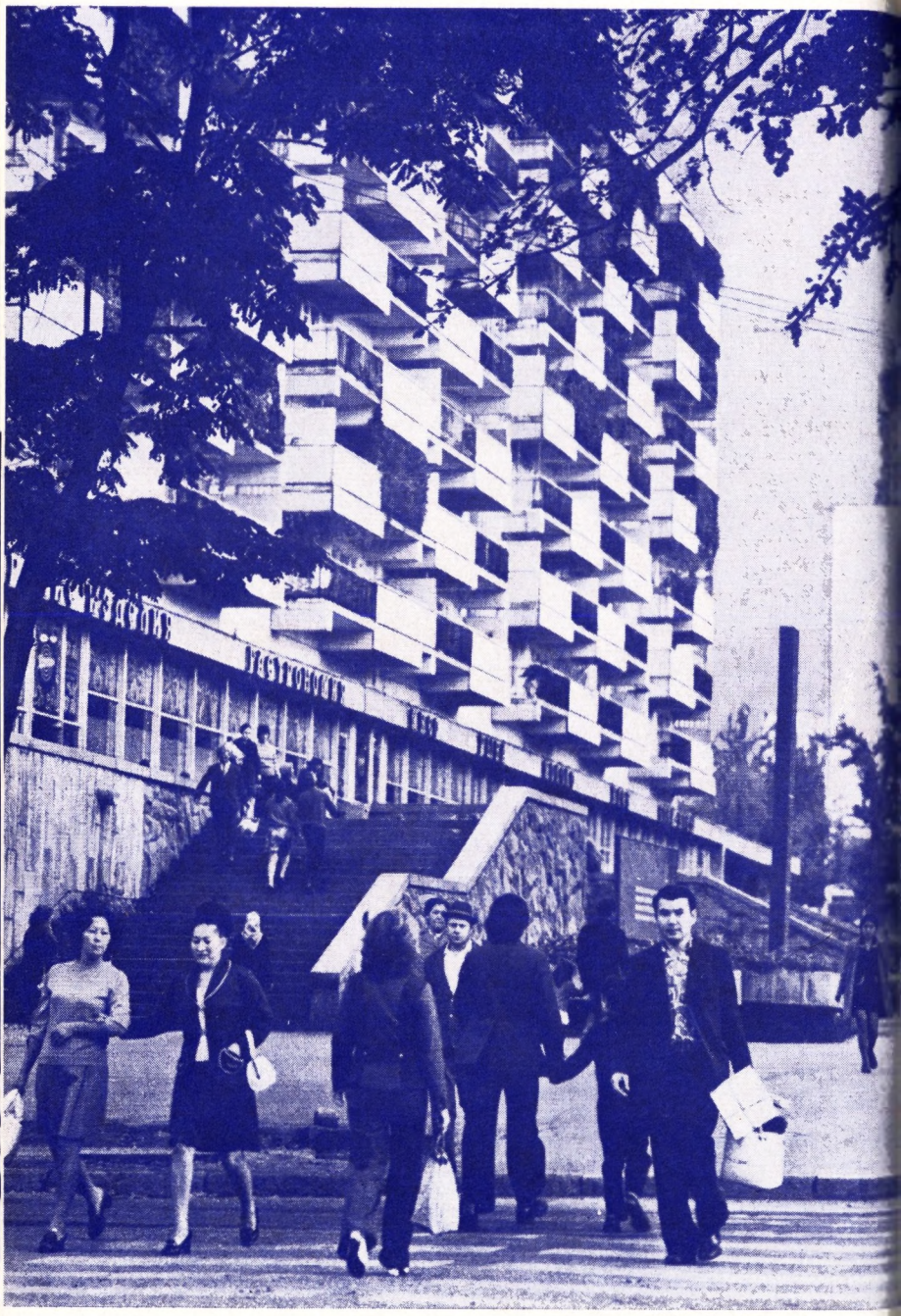
Construction of the Nurek
Hydroelectric Power Station

Construction workers on the Nurek Hydroelectric Power Station

The weaving workshop of the Dushanbe Silk Plant



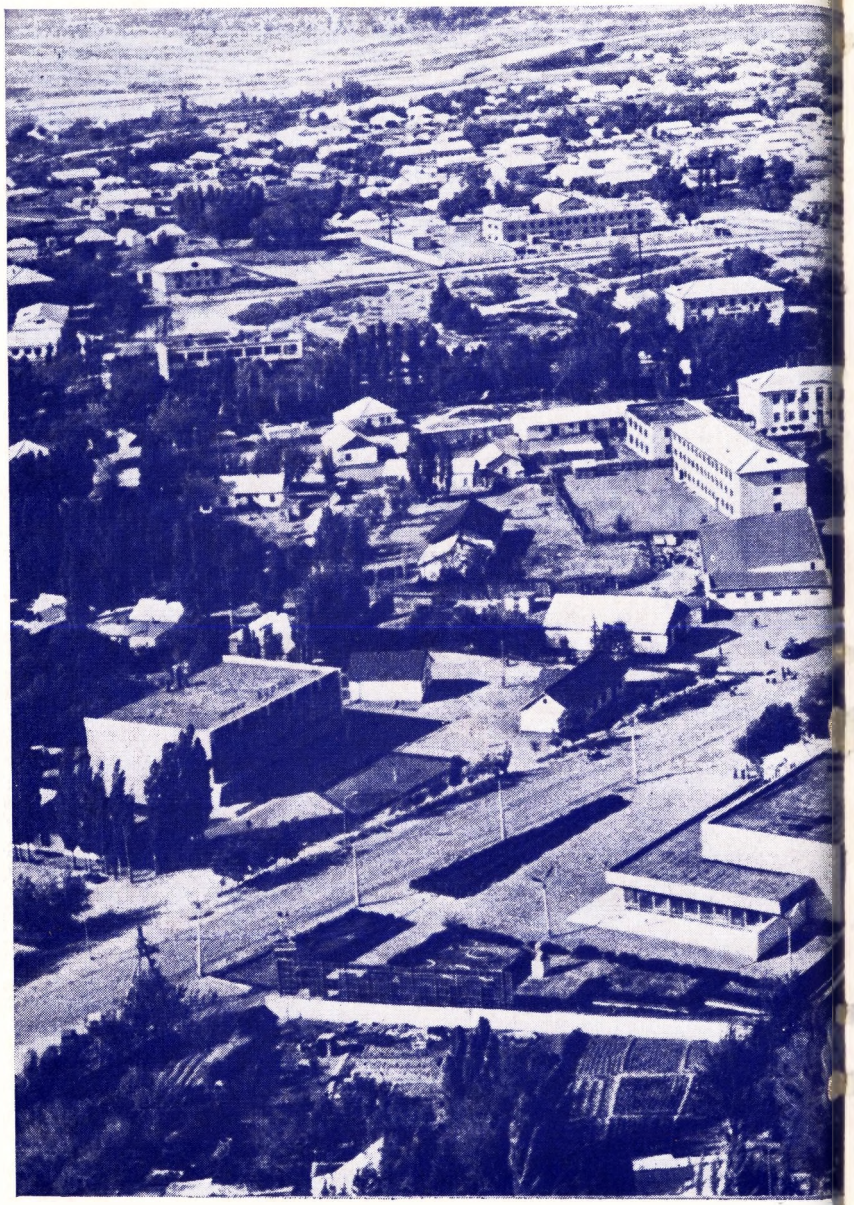
New housing development in Alma Ata



← KAZAKHSTAN

Lenin Prospekt in Alma Ata

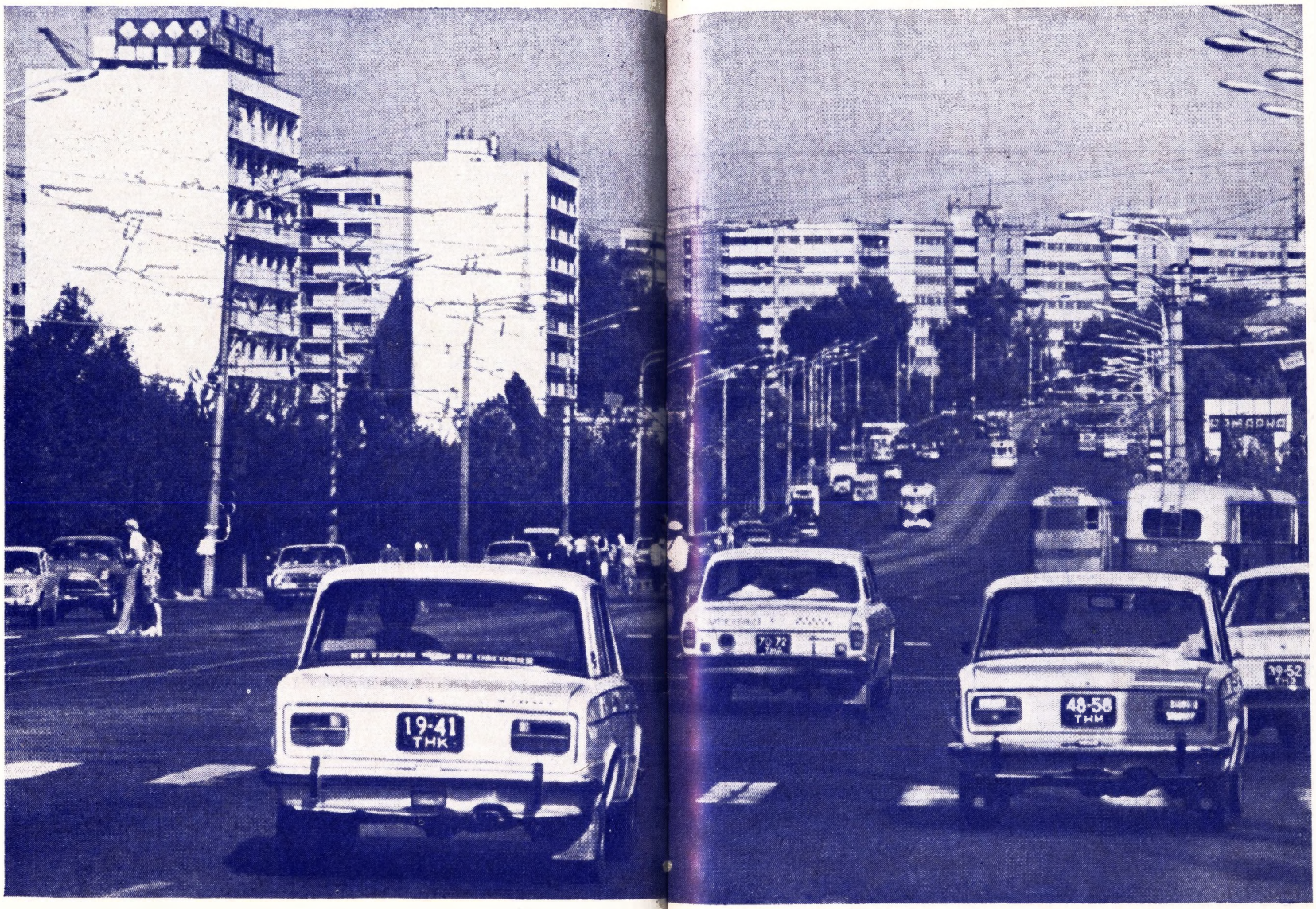
Medeo Stadium



Furmanovka, a modern
Kazakh settlement

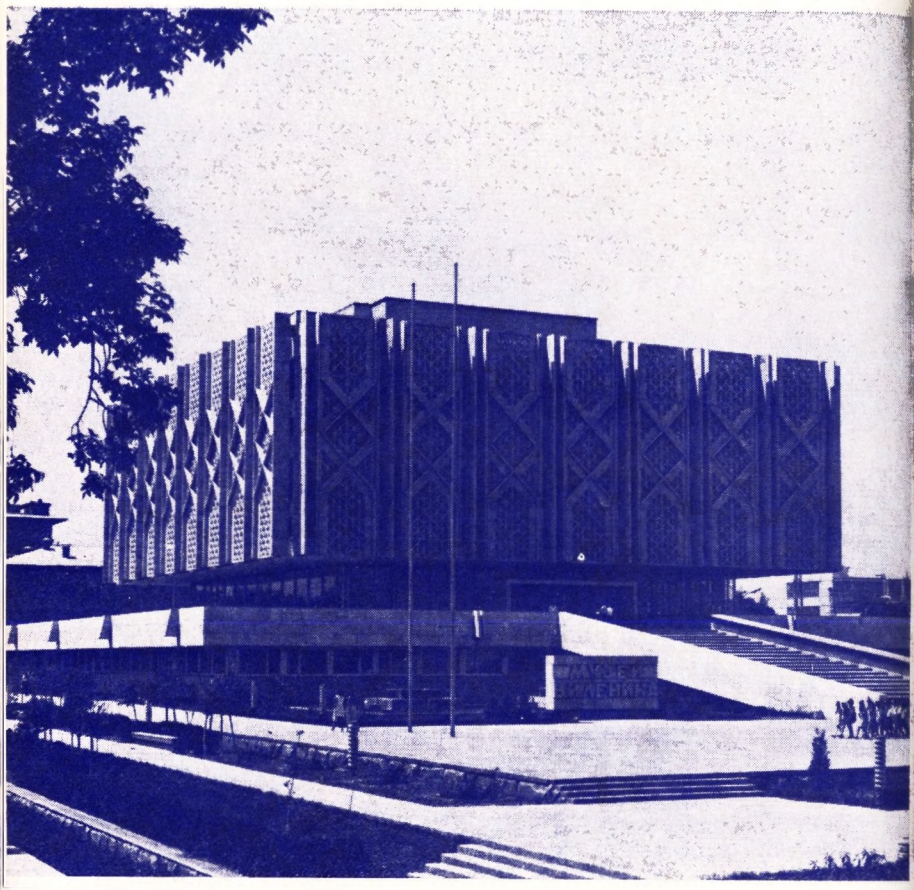
Sheep-breeders

A national Kazakh equestrian game, *Kyskuu* (catch the girl)



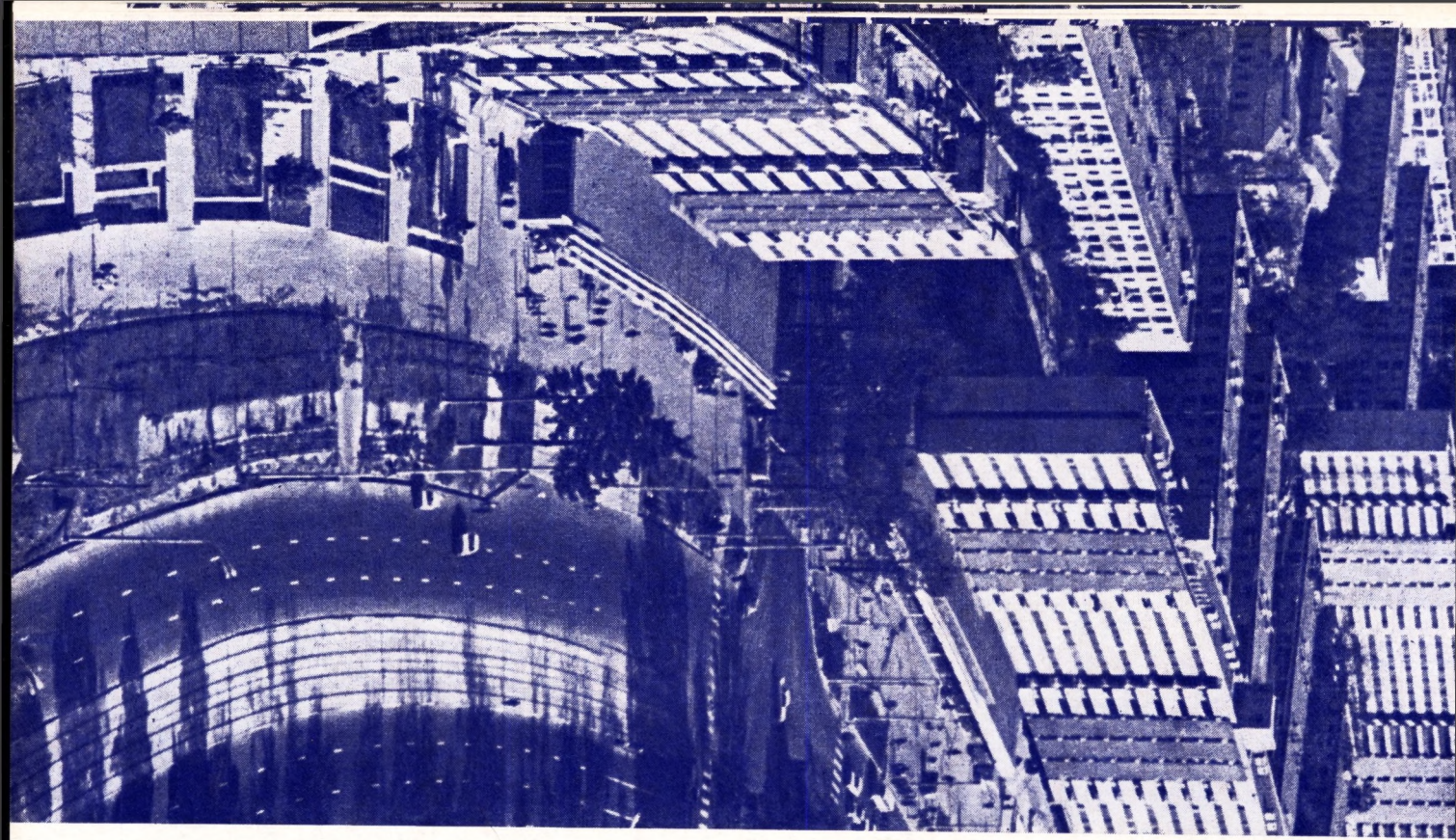
UZBEKISTAN

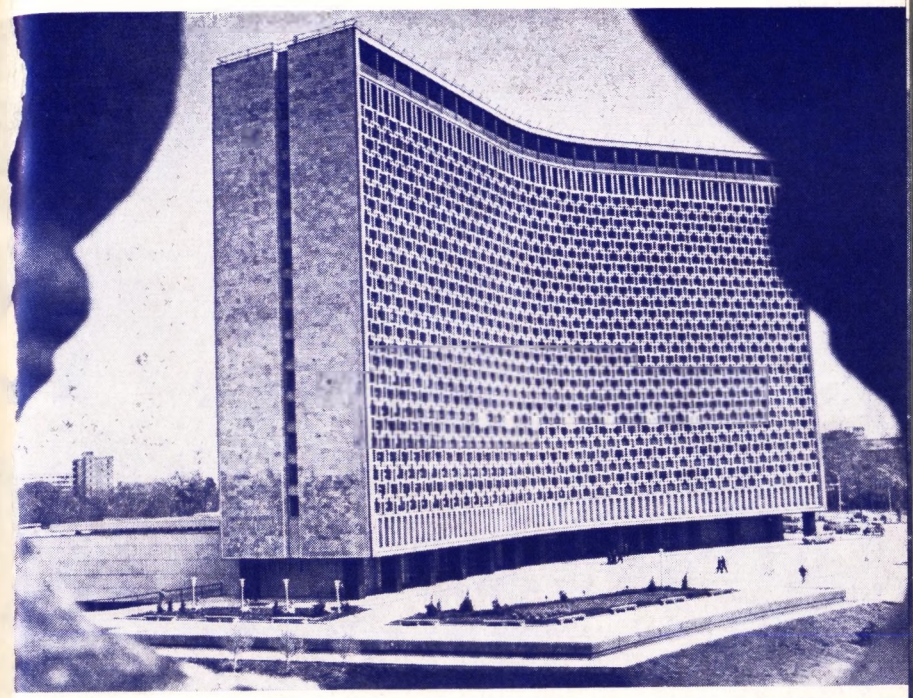
A street in Tashkent



Tashkent subsidiary of the
Lenin Museum

Fine Arts Palace in Tashkent ⟶





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Houses built by Muscovites in Tashkent after the earthquake

Uzbekistan Hotel in Tashkent

A view of Samarkand →

An old street in Samarkand. In the background is the famous Bibi-Khanym Mosque

Newly-weds place flowers at the foot of the monument to the dead in the Great Patriotic War →

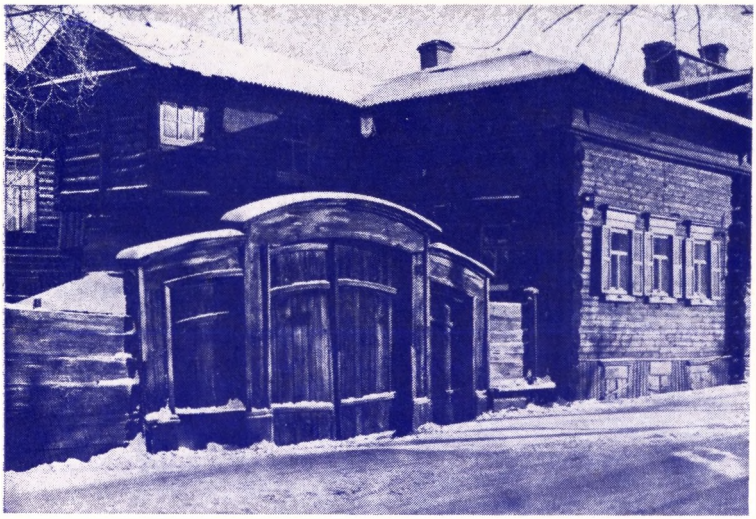
←

Kalyan Minaret in Bukhara

A city tea-house

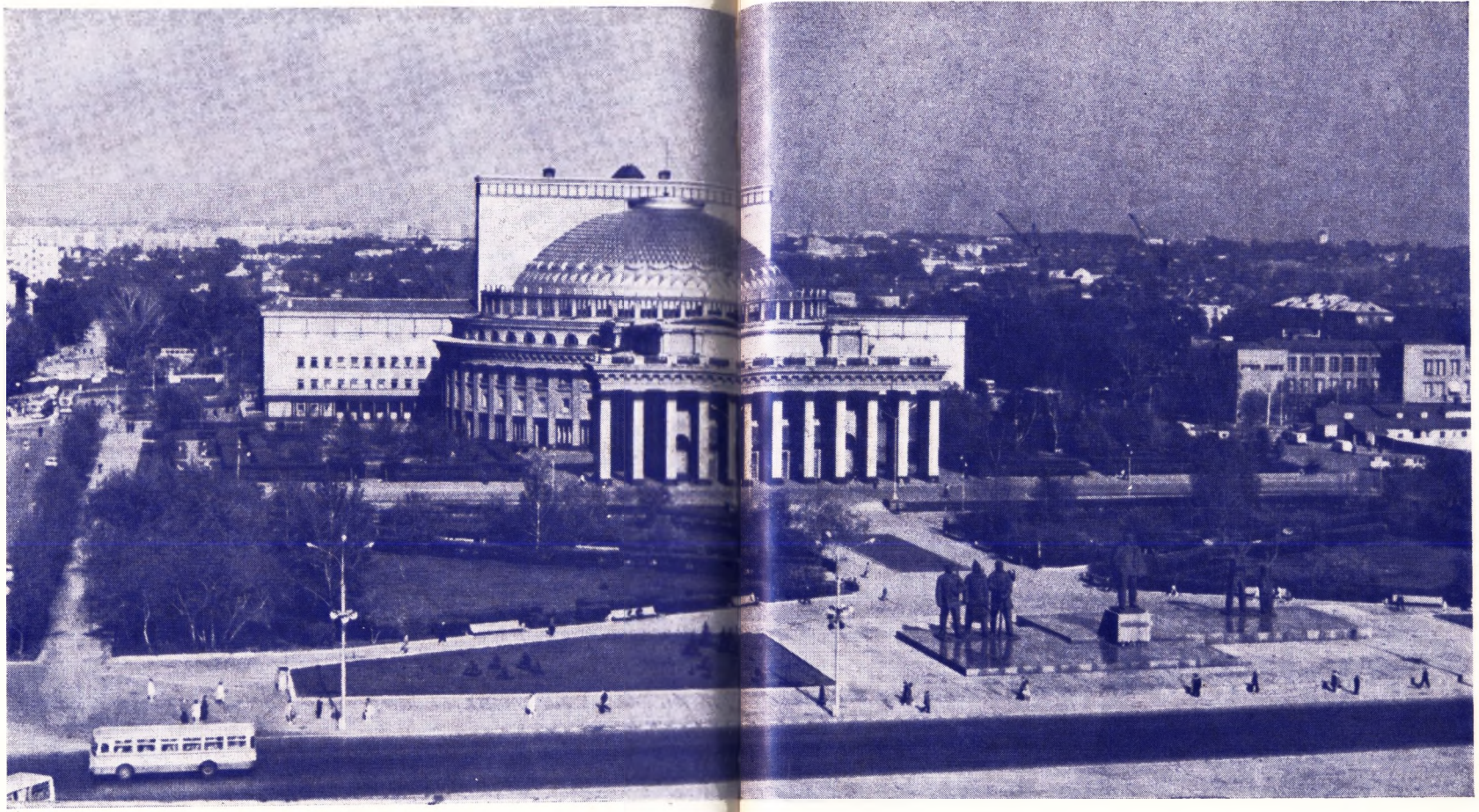
Try some *shashlik*!

Sorting pelts in the Bukhara
Karakul Factory



SIBERIA

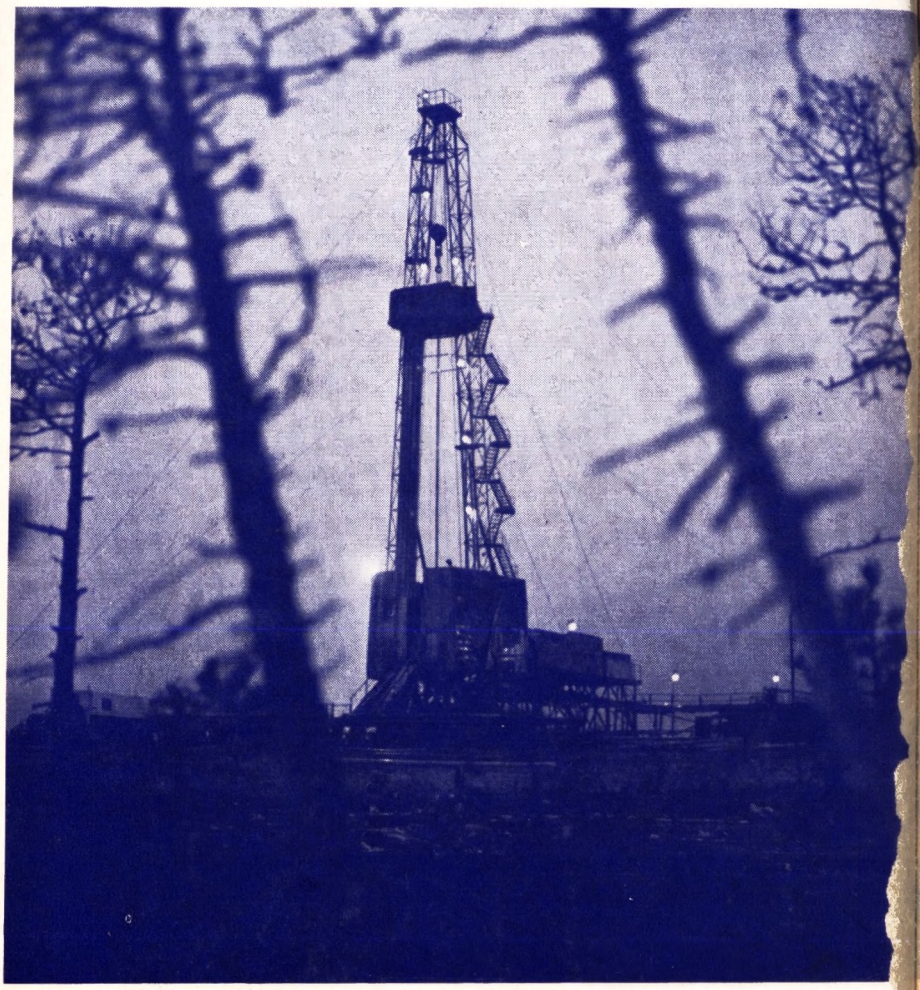
Angara Hotel in Irkutsk
The oldest log house in Irkutsk dates to the mid-18th century
Novosibirsk. Embankment and bridge across the Ob River →



The Novosibirsk Opera and Ballet Theatre

Akademgorodok. Computer Centre of the Siberian Branch of the USSR Academy of Sciences

Oil prospectors drilling an oil—> well in Tyumen



This is what a drilling
installation looks like

Oil drillers at work →

Dam of the Bratsk
Hydroelectric Power Station

In a Buryat school. Though the lesson is over, the children are in no hurry to go home →

КОРОШАЯ КНИГА -

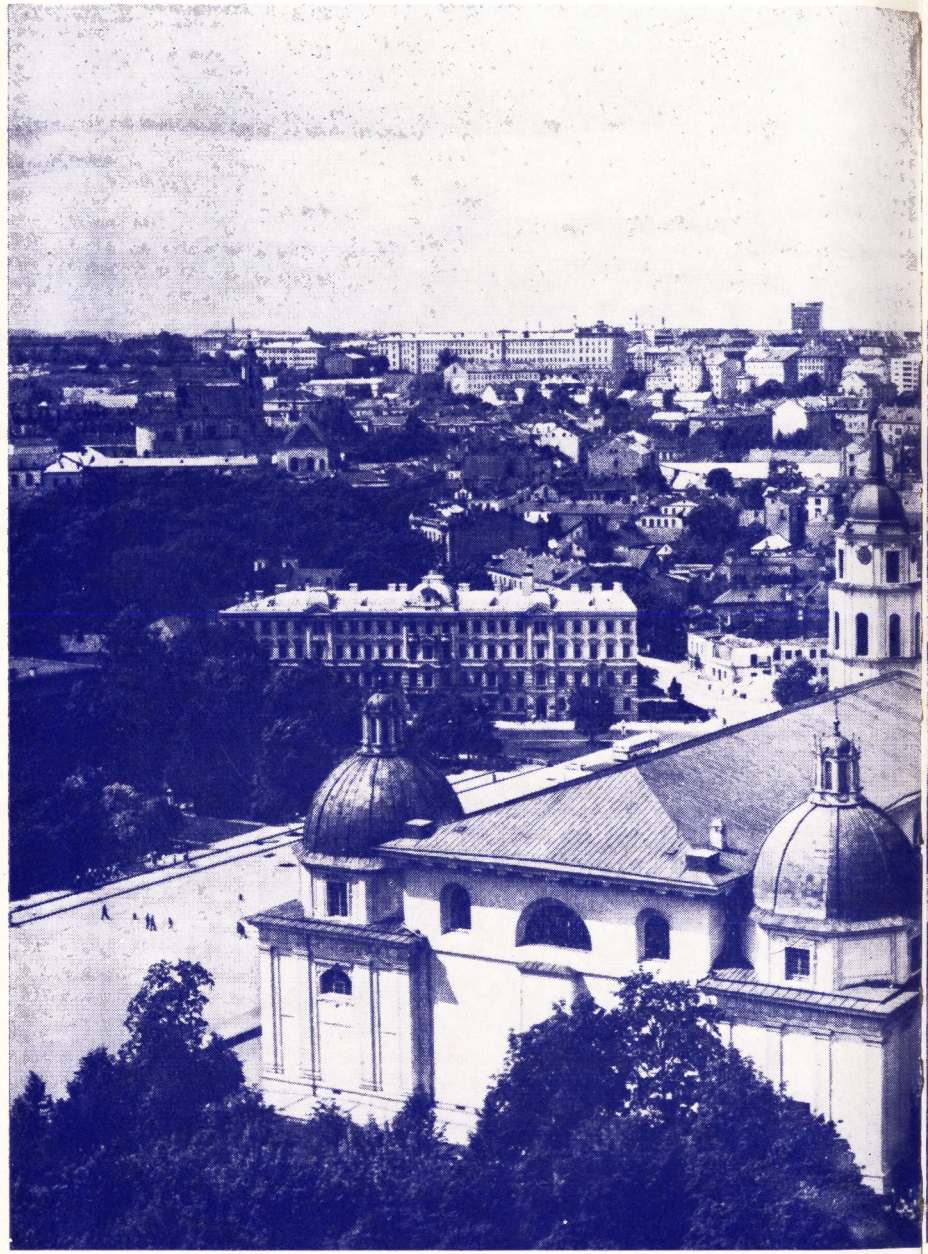
УГ НА ВСЮ ЖИЗНЬ

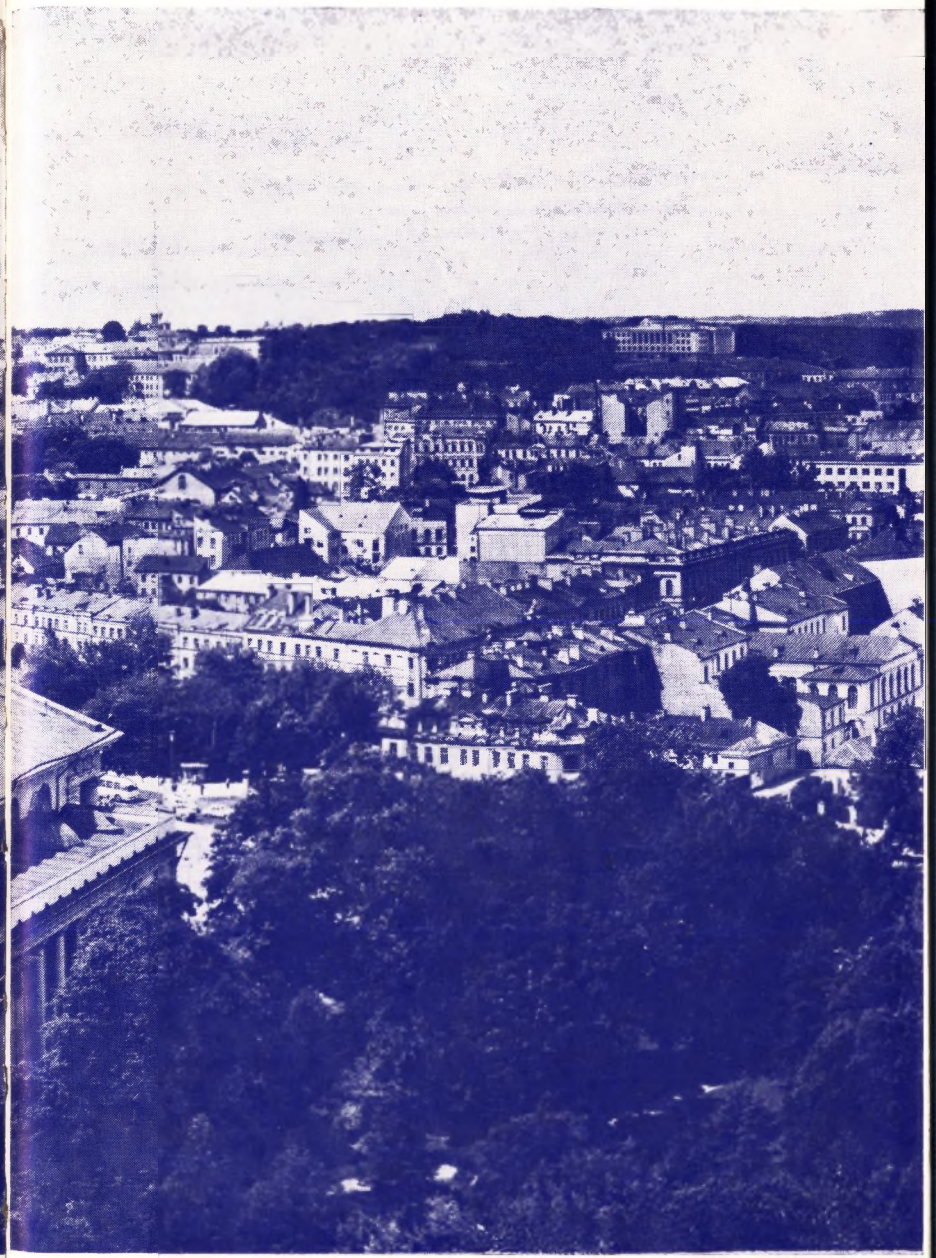
Lake Baikal

THE BALTIC REPUBLICS

A view of the old town and the bridge across the Niemen in Kaunas

A new housing development → in Vilnius



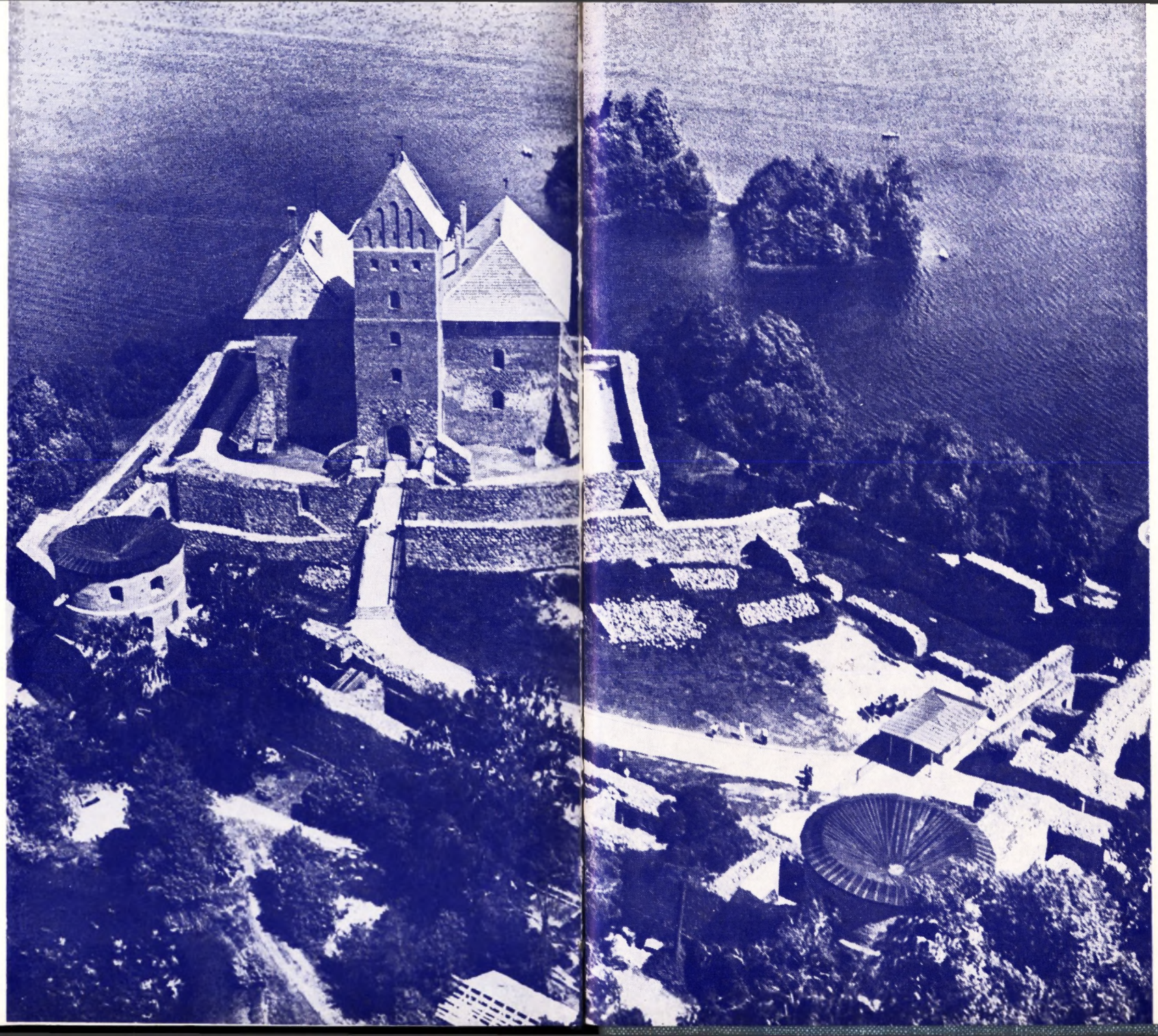


A view of Vilnius from Mount Gediminas

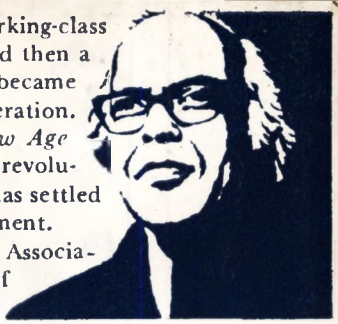
Residential quarter in
Elektrėnai, a new town

Monumental sculpture *Mother*
in Pirčiupis →

Trakai Castle →



Gintaras Hotel in Vilnius



Alex La Guma was born into a Cape Town working-class family in 1925. Starting life as a steelworker and then a worker of a South African oil company, he soon became active in the fight for his country's national liberation. From 1955 to 1962, he was on the staff of *New Age* weekly, and was repeatedly imprisoned for his revolutionary activity. Forced to leave the country, he has settled in Britain, where he is active in the peace movement. Alex La Guma is Deputy General Secretary of the Association of Asian and African Writers. He is winner of the international Lotus Prize for Literature.

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